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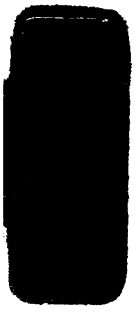

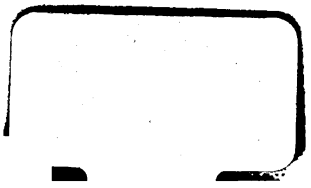

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TUSCAN FEASTS AND TUSCAN FRIENDS

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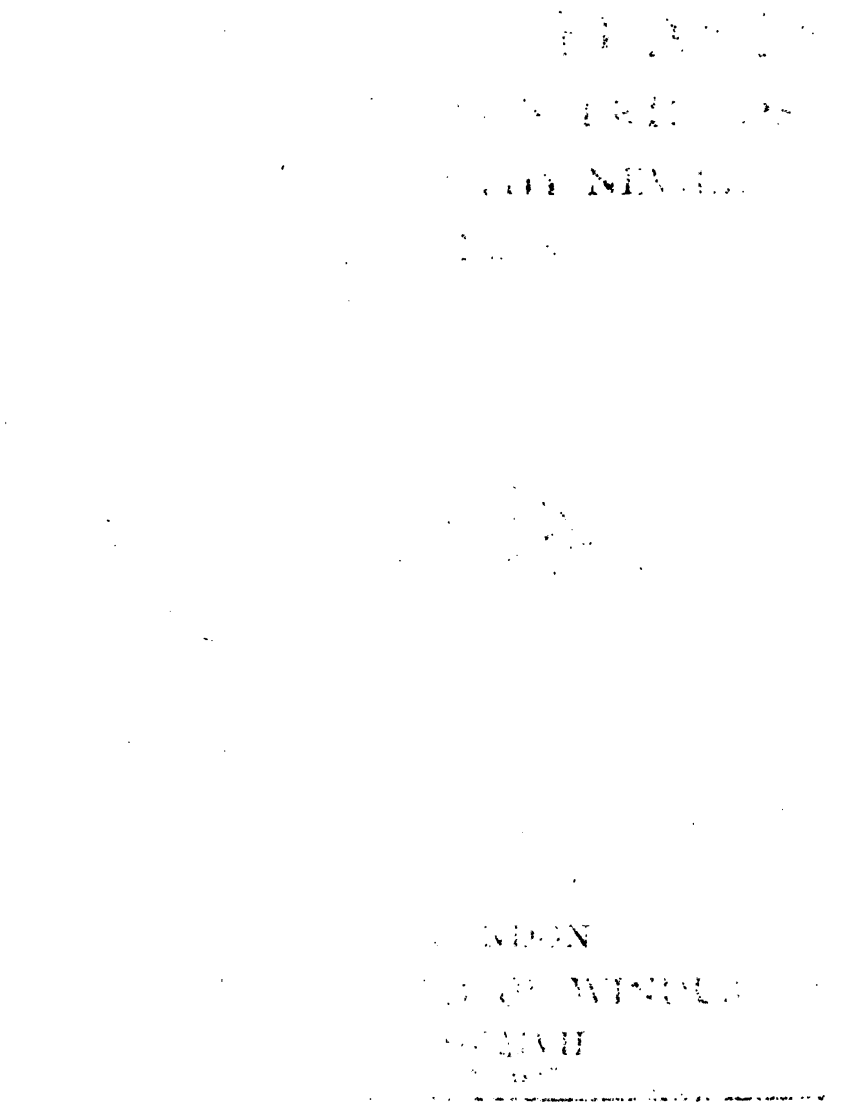

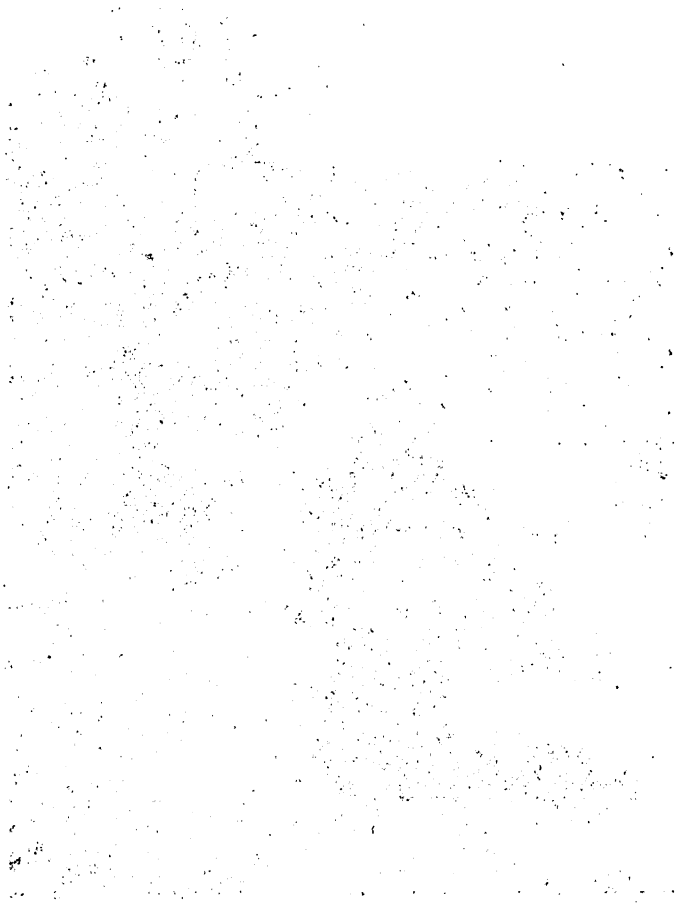

TUSCAN FEASTS

AND TUSCAN FRIENDS

BY DOROTHY NEVILE LEES

LONDON
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THIS —— "FOR REMEMBRANCE"

D. N. L.

"Oceans part not kindred hearts
While they remain akin."

FLORENCE,
April 1907

OCT 1988

IN A FAR COUNTRY

(Written near Florence in the Spring)

Land of my love, thy dome of sunny blue
  Curves to the circling Tuscan hills, which sleep
Quiet in robes of varying purple hue,
  O'er which, as dreams, the misty olives creep.
    Who has not longed 'neath changing northern skies
    To see the splendour of thy sun arise?

The scarlet tulips flame along the land;
  Rose leans towards iris, while in every grove
Black cypress-trees, grave as an upraised hand,
  Point from the earth to changeless things above.
    "Ave Maria" rings out as fades the light,
    And fire-flies wake to star the magic night.

O Italy, my land of Heart's Desire,
  No Paradise could be more fair than thou;
Eyes which may gaze on thee can never tire,
  And 'tis in no disloyalty that now
    I sigh a little for the daffodils
    That wave upon the windy English hills.

IN A FAR COUNTRY

As one in Heaven, if granted memory,
  Might dream sometimes along the golden streets
A little wistfully of earth, so I,
  When in my heart the past this present meets,
    Long once again to see the shadows pass
    Where daisies mingle with the meadow grass.

If I might see the larks go up again,
  Might hear the blackbirds in the woodland sing,
And wander down some English country lane
  Where violets breathe a welcome to the spring,
    Fain would I, if but for a little space,
    My way towards those northern shores retrace.

Yet while I could not, if I would, forget
  The mounting larks above the breezy down,
Nor cease to know a longing, half regret,
  When swallows, passing, Englandwards have flown,
    'Twould break my heart to say a last good-bye
    And leave, with them, this golden Italy.

My life is glad here in my southern home,
  Where sunbeams weave their gold through everything;
Yet ever there from time to time must come
  (Drawing, it may be, nearer in the spring)
    The thought of English lanes and English lawns,
    And birds that warble in the April dawns.

IN A FAR COUNTRY

Perhaps I should, if safe in Paradise,
  Long even there for countries loved of yore;
See visions of fair Italy arise,
  And sigh a little to return no more,
    As memories here to-day such longing bring
    To see but once again an English spring.

Or far beyond Life's bar is there some land
  Where essence of heart's joy shall be distilled?
Where all that we have seen or loved or planned
  Shall in each perfect moment be fulfilled?
    Where we shall dwell in joy no time can tire,
    Safe in the land of Realised Desire?

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TUSCAN FEASTS AND TUSCAN FRIENDS

I

A TUSCAN VILLA

FROM the first moment when, in the afternoon sunshine of a day sweet and unforgettable, a bend in the road revealed it, the Villa took prisoner my heart.

For more than an hour we had driven since leaving the city; along the roads whose grey stone walls were fringed with olive and cypress trees; through hamlets where women sat at the house doors plaiting straw hats with nimble fingers; up hillsides from which we looked down on Florence far beneath us, a queen enthroned on the plain, gleaming, as a dream city, with all the colours which sleep in the heart of an opal, set in the silver of the olives and guarded by the magic circle of purple hills; through vineyards and olive gardens, where the contadini were working, or driving their slow teams of oxen; past old white farm-houses and

little shrines; past pathetic wooden crosses making their mute appeal to all wayfarers; until finally the carriage turned through a mossy stone gateway, shaded by a cypress grove, into a gravelled courtyard, with well, fountain, and stone benches; and, looking up at the great house which on three sides enclosed it, I surrendered swiftly to the charm of this old-world place.

The Villa, strictly speaking, was not beautiful: its time-stained plastered walls, its lofty height, its heavily-barred windows were a little gaunt and forbidding; and yet, as I stepped down from the carriage, I felt instinctively that I had found the place of dreams and peace.

The entrance, surmounted by a heavy stone escutcheon, led into a great vaulted hall, once, as traces of arches testified, an open colonnade. A billiard-table stood in the middle; old oak chests and settles lined the walls; great open doors opened on to the garden beyond. Other doors, to right and left, led to cool spacious rooms, the whole suite of which opened one into another in true Italian fashion, with the same lofty vaulted ceilings, the same windows reached by flights of steps in the thickness of the walls, the same glass doors opening on to the sunny garden all aglow in the yellow evening light.

A TUSCAN VILLA

The Villa was at least four hundred years old, dating from the days of the Magnificent Lorenzo and Pico della Mirandola and Michelangelo, who may have come themselves—who knows?—to visit here in the sultry summer days. How much life, and how many changes must the old walls have witnessed; how many figures must have passed in and out of those rooms which still retain the fragrance of the past! It was a house to enchant any lover of antiquity, with its furniture of dark oak and antique gilded leather, its ancient bronze and silver lamps, its tapestries, its painted "Cassoni," in which the brides of a past day brought home their gear; its portraits of old-time Florentines in *lucco* or parti-coloured hose, in wigs and ruffles and brocaded coats; of ladies in Medicean costume, of grave-faced priors and dashing cavaliers, some of whom lived in, and, no doubt, still haunt, the quiet rooms on which they now gaze down!

It was not difficult to picture something of that old life of the quattro- and cinque-cento, to imagine the sober Florentine fathers, retiring to the Villa for rest from the cares of state and business; their submissive wives—old before their time from too-early marriage—their daughters, the girls for whom Domenico Bigordi, called the "Garland-maker,"

and Benvenuto Cellini, wrought their silver girdles and wreaths. One seemed to step back into that old life, to be almost a part of it, so potent was the spell of the quiet, storied place.

The Villa was so large that the ground-floor afforded all needful accommodation, and above was a wilderness of empty rooms and lofty halls, where, in spite of the storage of grain and grapes and old furniture, traces of nobler use yet lingered in the dim, peeling frescoes on the walls.

There, the credulous assert, dwell many ghosts in the dark rooms and closets and quaint spiral staircases which wind up and down in the massive walls; and the under-footman, a sturdy, round-faced, and apparently unromantic lad, wept like a fountain when it was decreed that he should sleep there, his anguish being only soothed by the concession of a sofa in a passage downstairs.

Above the haunted quiet of these ill-famed rooms the stairs led on, until they emerged upon the terraces at the top of the house, one part of which is flat-roofed, Eastern fashion, surrounded by a stone balustrade; the other, a storey higher, roofed over, and open along its length, with stone parapet and rows of columns —a loggia such as, found in most ancient Italian

palaces and villas, affords one of their principal charms.

Yes, it was a story-book house! So I decided that night in my quaint little bedroom, with its high wagon-roof and red-paved floor, while the moon, low in the west above the dark huddle of the woods, shone in through the window, drawing the close-crossed bars, with which Italians guard all lower casements, in clear black outline upon the opposite wall. Watching the quiet silver light, which seemed like a benediction, making the little room a holy place, and listening to the dripping of the fountain and the hooting of the owls in the profound stillness of the September night, I could but fall asleep murmuring, "the lot is fallen unto me in a fair ground," since the guiding star of fortune had stood still for me above a place so sweet.

I was awakened betimes next morning by a chorus of varied sounds: the barking of dogs, the creak and splash from the well as the copper pails went up and down, and the united singing of the birds in the garden, and of Luigi, as he swept the floor in the adjacent room.

Luigi is a cheery soul, and, having been apprenticed to a cobbler in early youth, follows naturally in his master's steps, and does his work to the accompaniment of "Laudi" and

Ave Marias. He possesses all the virtues of Italian men-servants, who are generally far less high-and-mighty, more ready to adapt themselves to circumstances, and to help in emergencies than English; and there is little which Luigi cannot or will not do.

He excels in domestic service, and waits at table with cheerful alacrity; he is prompt and entirely trustworthy in the execution of commissions; his management of a garden or of poultry is masterly, and he can ably supply, at need, the place of cook.

I fear he thinks my list of acquaintances woefully limited, and fancies my life must have been a retired one, as, though several of his relations have been in service in English families, few of these have been known to me, even by name. In response to the question whether I know the "Signor Clar-r-rk-e who stays at London," or the "Signora Adam who has a house in Wales," it grieves me to reply in the negative, and, seeing Luigi's rising eyebrows, I hasten to explain that, England being a large place, there still remain a considerable number of people whom it has not been my privilege to meet.

"Well, did the Signorina know the Signor Georgio Augusto Sala, a gentleman much distinguished, to whom his cousin Torquato

had been butler?" Ah, at last fate was kind! I had heard of him, though, being still in my nursery at the time of his death, I had been denied his acquaintance. Still, even so, it united us with the pleasant sensation of a "mutual friend," and Luigi often seizes the occasion for exchanging a few words on the subject of this eminent man.

Luigi, with all his virtues, is by no means an exception, Italian servants being for the most part a cheery, bright-mannered race, as well the women as the men.

The demure English maid, in her black dress, capped and aproned, is unknown in Italy except in those houses where foreign mistresses have introduced foreign customs. The Italian maid dresses in whatever colours please her taste—and her taste is usually gay. She wears an apron, but would scorn the innovation of a cap. She chats pleasantly with her mistress, is not blameless of hearty laughter as she waits at meals if the conversation happens to amuse her, and carols cheerily at her work about the house. But it is all done in sheer good spirits and lightness of heart, and the Italian possesses an innate courtesy which never degenerates into familiarity, and, talk as much as one will to a contadino or servant, there is little fear of being taken liberties with or treated with less respect.

Adelina or Domenica will, as a matter of course, comment admiringly upon your clothes, and probably ask where you got them and other details, wishing thereby to show a friendly interest; in reply to your remark that the weather is beautiful, will come, not unlikely, the charming rejoinder, "Anche lei, Signorina" (You, too, Signorina)—little amenities which are assuredly productive of good-temper and oil the wheels of life, and no servant, unless in a very ceremonious family, would think of passing through a room while a meal was in progress without a "buon appetito" (good appetite), to the company, or see you leave the house without wishing you "good diversion" or a "pleasant walk!"

The lower-class Italian, especially of peasant birth, is, in fact, a fascinating person, and although in these modern days his costume as a rule is painfully prosaic, his name is usually sonorous and high-sounding, more befitting a hero of romance than a domestic servant in a work-a-day world. A burly ox-driver will, for instance, answer to the charming title of "Angiolino" (the little angel); the cook, a cunning old soul, who robs his mistress on the marketing, but serves dishes fit for the gods, will probably inform you that his name is "Innocente," while it is most likely "Paradiso" or "Narciso" who waits at table and cleans your boots.

A TUSCAN VILLA

I was out in the garden early on that first morning at the Villa, eager to explore my Promised Land; for the first waking in a new place always stirs the spirit of adventure, and, for me, it was a fresh world which stretched on every side.

Italian gardens are curiously different from English; but in spite of the fact that, owing to the heat under which grass does not flourish, they lack our lawns—that lovely old turf, so characteristic of the ancient English pleasaunce—they have a charm and character all their own.

They have groves of cypress; thickets of laurestinus, myrtle, and ilex, where the nightingales sing through the still nights of summer; mossy fountains and old white statues of fauns and nymphs; they have hedges of monthly roses on which the flowers grow so thickly that hardly a leaf is seen, and masses of oleander, azalea, and camelia in every shade from white to crimson. Magnolias, too, they have —the pale, leafless pink ones which the early spring brings, and the ivory blossoms which in June fill the air with heavy fragrance from their high, glossy-leafed trees. Pomegranates, too, abound, with their fire-red flowers; and Judas trees and Polonias, laburnums, lilacs, pergolas of roses and vines and wistaria, bitter-

orange trees which scent all the air with their perfume in early summer, and in autumn are hung with golden fruit; and lemons bordering, in their earthen pots, the gravel walks. These last are to me one of the chief charms of an Italian garden, and if the tree from which Eve plucked the apple were as fair as a lemon or an orange in full fruit, I can understand the temptation, so lovely are they when the sun shines on their golden globes and pointed foliage, so beautiful is the fruit with the little spray of leaves attached.

How the old painters loved gardens! How exquisite are the pleasaunces in the pictures of Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli and Botticelli and Filippino Lippi, with their delightful old-world fruit and flowers, their still glades and atmosphere of enchanted quiet! In them angels gather flowers and dance in rings like happy children, and, in such, God Himself must surely walk in the cool of the day.

After an hour's wandering up and down I sat down to rest and realise my surroundings on an old stone bench beneath a fig-tree, where, by merely putting up my hand, I could refresh myself at will.

The varieties of figs in which one revels in Italy are endless and quite unknown in England, where, since it is a fruit which must be

eaten fresh from the trees, it is impossible to send them; but among others are the "Verdini," green-skinned, with crimson pulp; the "Dottati," long, light-green purses, golden inside; and the "Brogiotti," large and of dark purple, crimson at the heart.

As I ate my figs I watched the gardener busy over the irrigation of his vegetable beds, and was struck by the ingenuity which contrives to refresh a large space of parched ground in an amazingly short time; for, the beds being intersected by a network of little channels cut in the soil, along which water is allowed to run in any direction needed, the mouth of each channel, when filled, is closed with a clod of earth. Certainly the plan seemed to answer, for after the hot summer months the garden looked fresh and fertile, with abundant beans and tomatoes, and with the autumn flowers breaking into bloom.

Spring and autumn are in Italy the flower seasons; in July and August the heat is too oppressive; but with September the pink roses blossom for the second time, their bright faces pushing over the walls of every road until late into November; verbenas, geraniums, dahlias, carnations, and cream and crimson roses, fill the gardens, and so like summer does it seem that it is a surprise, almost a shock, when the

autumn rains set in and winter is upon us all at once.

Really, considering all the delights which lay around me on that autumn morning, I did not wonder at the panegyric in which Leo Battista Alberti indulged in his treatise *Del Governo della Famiglia*, when he thought about his villa and its joys.

The ambition of the ancient Florentine—perhaps also of the modern—was always to possess a country villa, and the full desirableness of such possession is put into words by good old Alberti:—

"A great and pure usefulness is always found in the Villa. All other occupations are full of labour, danger, suspicion, harm, repentance, and fear. . . . The country is gracious, trustworthy, true. If you give yourself up to it patiently and lovingly, it never seems to be satisfied with what it does for you, but continually adds reward after reward. In spring the Villa gives thee continual delight: foliage, flowers, odours, songs of birds; and in every way makes thee gay and joyful—all smiles upon thee and promises a good ingathering, fills thee with every good hope, delight, and pleasure. How courteous is the country! She sends you now one fruit, now another, never leaving the city empty of some of her gifts!"

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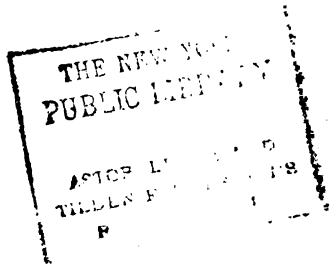
THE SUNNY GARDEN ALL AGLOW IN THE YELLOW EVENING LIGHT.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Certainly, I found the country "gracious" and continually delightful, and was well content to dream away the days in so lovely a retreat.

Italian country life is far more simple, more informal than English; and though people welcome their friends to spend a day, or for a more prolonged visit, there is little ceremonious or formal entertaining, no elaborate jewels nor toilets, and the "smart" English "house-party" is a thing practically unknown.

Few people live all the year round in the country, and those who can afford it usually spend the winter season in town—the "season" being the Carnival time from Christmas to Easter; the summer, when no one willingly stays in the city, at the "Bagni di Mare"—some seaside resort — or in more extended travelling, and the autumn (a busy season for landowners) on the country estate.

The country life is usually very quiet, and a little solitary and isolated, but full of simple pleasures; to me, at least, it is beautiful, and the days hardly long enough for the delights with which they are filled.

There are excursions on foot, on horseback, or in carriages; there are the harvest, the vintage, and the oil-pressing, each in turn; there are visits to the contadini, rambles in the

woods in search of mushrooms, blackberries, and pine-cones; solemn progresses in ox-carts; croquet and tennis on what we call by courtesy "the lawn," although it is little but a hard expanse of trodden soil with a crop of lusty weeds, among which the balls bound gaily in and out. A scientific player would certainly scorn the games under such conditions—but are there not compensations for bad turf when fresh figs offer themselves invitingly on every side, when ripe grapes hang in clusters near every hoop, and below the hill lies all the glory of Val d'Arno, with the mountain wall beyond?

Added to all these active pleasures there are merry breakfasts under the pergola, and evening dinners in the garden while the sunset glow turns everything to gold; and, between these, long hours of books and dreams on the old stone seats in the garden or among the olives and vines. Lastly, and perhaps most wonderful of all, there are the hours spent in the magic of the Italian night upon the great terrace, raised above the rest of the world like the deck of a ship at sea, while the scent of roses and orange blossom blows up from the garden, and the nightingales sing in the cypresses, and we watch the splendour of the summer lightning play behind the cloud-mountains in the Eastern sky, or Charles's Wain pass down be-

hind the Western hill, or the moon roll slowly up above the Apennines, whitening the scattered villas, farms, and churches, and flooding all the land with light.

Ah yes! it is a beautiful life; and when the winter is upon us, the crops all garnered and the bare vines pruned back to the very stock; when the dark plough-land is dreaming of a future harvest, and the old house given over for the winter to its memories and its ghosts, it is a little sadly that I turn my face towards the city, for I, like that long-dead writer, find the Villa of "great and pure usefulness," since there I ever learn afresh to love the quiet joys which await us when we will hush our hearts to listen to the earth voices; there, drawing close to Nature, enfolded by her, in the silence, I fill my soul with peace, and with a joy which lingers as the music of the waves in the shell they have once cradled at their heart.

II

BIANCA MARIA

THERE can be no doubt that any record of my Tuscan friends ought to accord a prominent place to Bianca Maria, she being one of those who has crept the closest to my heart.

Bianca Maria is seven years old, but is careful to explain that she will "have eight" on her next birthday, although that auspicious day is nearly eleven months ahead. She has large grey eyes, which are by turns innocently appealing and mischievously gay, a quaint little face, and fair hair cut rather short and tied up on the top of her head with a large bow, or plaited in a tail of about a finger's length and thickness down the back.

When I first met Bianca Maria she was staying in the country with a large family of cousins, and as I drove up to the door I saw her playing in an old Etruscan sarcophagus, which, hewn thousands of years back, had once, doubtless, held the bones of some king or warrior, but was now the storehouse for dolls, mud-pies, and all the treasures of a child. She met me in the most friendly spirit, and all

the children were about me in a moment, chattering like a flock of sparrows, offering bunches of wilted, short-stalked flowers clasped overlong in small hot hands, and begging me to go and visit rabbits, guinea-pigs, and the other possessions dear to childish hearts.

For me Bianca Maria's principal charm lies in her quaint, old-fashioned manner. The child of a great family, she looks, but for the costume, for all the world like one of those stiff, dainty little figures which delight us in the frescoes of Ghirlandajo and the painters of his day, and I can well imagine her small, demure face looking down upon me from some church or cloister wall. She is an accurate and careful little person, eating only of such things as experience has led her to believe wholesome, and but slowly and sparingly of those. She is never hasty to pronounce judgment in any matter, and has a mind open to conviction, as is proved by her self-ordained habit of trying periodically, at least once a year, the dishes which she dislikes, to see if by chance her taste has changed! and though in the matter of food she is kept a little strictly, I believe that her own prudent soul entirely coincides with the decision of the higher powers. Towards the end of dinner there is always, for instance, a choice of immense importance to

be made—shall she take sweet or dessert, only one of the two being permitted? This is, as may be imagined, a momentous decision, but, once made, most honourably adhered to. Bianca Maria realises perfectly well that, like Rosamond, she cannot have both shoes and purple jar. There is never any plea for a relaxation of the rule, and when one evening as she was lingeringly consuming her last spoonful of ice, I thoughtlessly asked if she would like to share a peach, she replied briefly and with praiseworthy uprightness, "I can't"—although her mother was not there.

Bianca Maria is a veritable comedian, and will sit on a garden seat for hours, quite alone, carrying on some private drama; talking for a dozen characters by turn with varied voice and gesture; and so absorbed is she in this imaginary world as to be entirely unconscious or heedless of any grown-up people who draw near.

Certainly the part which imagination plays in a child's world is an interesting subject, and it is worth while to try and note to just what extent imagination can supply their requirements, and how much solid and tangible material they need. I had an instance of this dividing line between the essential and the non-essential as I watched the little girls one day.

They were playing at "house" in the large porch of the villa, and each had appropriated a corner and some part of the furniture as her own. Vincenza had arranged a commodious and well-appointed dwelling, with a garden seat to enclose it on the one open side and a wing of the folding doors—which opened and shut in the most realistic manner—on the other, and was already playing, contented as a *Festa*, while Bianca Maria's mind, from the gloom which overspread her face was, I could see, very ill at ease.

She, it appeared, had only been able to secure the toy-chest to build her house with, and consequently one side was gaping open in a most cheerless and inhospitable way. What was to be done? Tears, I saw, were not far off, and I watched with interest to see how she would act. Suddenly her eyes fell upon the skipping-rope; she picked it up, tied it across the open side of her house, and entering, with an expression of supreme contentment, settled down to her domestic affairs.

Now, one would have thought that a mind which could perceive in a skipping-rope a perfectly adequate and satisfactory wall, could have created the wall entirely from imagination; but no: some foundation there had to be, some concrete object to be transformed by

the magic touch of fancy, some peg, however frail, on which to hang the creation of the brain.

The more time, however, one spends with children, the more fully does one realise their independence of elaborate aids in their games and amusements; and since I have known Bianca Maria it has become a source of real wonder to me that people ever trouble to give children expensive toys at all. Indeed, her costly playthings generally lie unheeded on the shelf while she is absorbed with the making of mud-pies or chestnut-cattle, and I notice that her heart cleaves like a burr to a woollen dress to two dolls of primitive simplicity—Lucy and Verdiana—while, though she admits if questioned that "is beautiful also she," she manifests a chilling indifference to a waxen wonder, dowered with the gifts of speech and independent motion, which was sent from the "Gay Paris."

No account of Bianca Maria would be complete which did not describe, however inadequately, these two objects—she herself would call them persons—upon which she lavishes so much care and affection.

My first introduction to Lucy was on the morning after my arrival when, going into the garden, I found Bianca Maria sitting under a

lemon-tree, nursing with immense tenderness a log of wood around which a duster had been folded as a shawl. I instantly perceived that it was only the dulness of my mental vision which had deluded me with the idea that it was a common piece of wood, and, sitting down near Bianca Maria on an old stone seat, I set to work as tactfully as possible to learn what it was which her clearer eyes discerned in this most uncompromising log. She was quite ready to enlighten my ignorance, and I soon learned that this was "Lucy"; that she had been originally about five feet high—had, in fact, begun life as a gatepost on leaving her parent tree—and had been at first the joint property of Bianca Maria and Vincenza; but their devotion was so great, the jealousy as to who should have the honour of washing and dressing her so bitter, that at last they decided to enact the judgment of Solomon, and the precious object was sawn into two equal parts by the carpenter, and, contrary to all the laws of Euclid, each half made a perfect whole.

Lucy was certainly of a most elementary form, being the same from the top to the bottom, but she had at least this virtue—she could stand with perfect security by the hour, her single foot being large and conveniently flat. On one side of the supposed head a face

had been drawn, four dabs of paint representing eyes, nose, and mouth; and when I ventured to ask if I was right in believing that the eyes were black, Bianca Maria was quite offended. "*Niente affatto*, she has the eyes blue like me," she replied with some asperity, after gazing lovingly into those inexpressive orbs, and she turned away from me and began rubbing sand and water upon the top of the head, hoping, as she informed me in the interval of her labours, to strengthen the growth of the hair, which she wished should be abundant as the "falling rain." This hope has, I fear, not been gratified, as when I last saw Lucy her flat head was still as bare as an asphalt floor!

As for "Verdiana," she was originally my creation; but it was Bianca Maria who endowed her with so strong a personality, who, as it were, breathed upon the dead bones and made them live.

Verdiana consists of a wooden stake about two feet long, with one fine sharp pointed foot which can be fixed firmly in the ground. A cross-bar bound to this central piece represents arms, and the whole is clothed in living green—a skirt of fresh arbutus twigs bound round the waist and frilling out in a jaunty and fashionable way at the ankles, and

similar frills from neck to waist and round the arms.

It is naturally from this woodland costume that she takes her name, but it must be owned that, to the casual observer, she suggests nothing so strongly as a churchyard cross! This view of the case is, as may be supposed, most hurtful to Bianca Maria's feelings—what mother would wish her child to be likened to a funeral offering?—and she herself sees in Verdiana a beautiful fairy-like creature, green as the woods which gave her birth, the green sister of the trees and bushes among whom she has her home; for rules are strict upon this point, and Verdiana is not, to her mother's deep regret and chagrin, allowed to cross the threshold of the house, but must, in the evenings, be laid to rest in a hollow in the wood, where, next morning, we find her fresh with dew.

There is, however, in spite of the sylvan charms of Verdiana as compared with Lucy's somewhat prosaic and solid worth, no favouritism in Bianca Maria's affection, for when I asked (indiscreetly, I own) if she had any preference, she replied with true impartiality, "I love them, I, all two!"

Of her real toys—those, I mean, which began life *as* toys—I doubt if there is one nearer to

Bianca Maria's heart than Mr. Brown, a small Swiss wooden bear, originally seated forcibly by means of glue in a little chair. Nursery violence and the vicissitudes of time have bereft him of his chair, but his attitude is perpetually as one who sits. This cherished friend is seldom separated from her, and at almost any time one may behold, peering above the pocket of her pinafore, his grave and spectacled head.

One of Bianca Maria's favourite amusements is that one dear to the hearts of children of all nations—the making of mud-pies. There is no end to the articles which she will not produce out of a ball of mud, but some of her favourites are nests and birds of clay with tiny eggs, which she sets about in the laurels, where they look quite realistic; and the more so as, after the lapse of some days—or some hours—she goes round and substitutes little birds for the eggs, pretending (what could be more natural?) that they have just been hatched. The discovery of these nests seems to afford the children the same exquisite surprise as if they had had no previous hand in the matter, and it is with the utmost astonishment and pleasure that Bianca Maria comes hastening to announce to me that she has found "a nest and two baby birds just borned!" Another of her favourite works—the idea being entirely her own—is the con-

struction of *porte enfants* in clay. For these she has a genius, ranging the round serene faces (the features marked out with a pine needle) on the pillow with infinite skill, and covering them with an earthern blanket. I do not know how many babies Bianca Maria considers an adequate and natural number at any one time, but from watching her at play, I gather that her views resemble those of the children who, acting a play of their own (not, it is needless to say, previously supervised by their elders!), represented a husband returning from a year's travelling and recounting all his labours to his wife. After listening with approval to his story the little wife nodded, and, rising, withdrew a curtain, disclosing a long row of baby dolls. "And I, too, have not been idle," she remarked complacently, as she exhibited them before her husband's admiring eyes!

A *porte enfant* is one of Bianca Maria's favourite gifts; she offers one to any member of her family who may return from a journey or a day in town. "I must make it a *porte enfant* to mamma, poor thing," she observes, as she sets to work, the "poor thing" being intended as a term of endearment, and not implying that her mother is anyways afflicted in mind, body, or estate; and presently she adds with a sigh—the sigh of an artist whose reach

exceeds her grasp—"I do it the better I know, but it is no very beautiful! My clay it is too thirsty; what to do? for if I give it to drink it is too wet," and her round face wears a harassed expression until at last the perfect consistency is obtained.

I cannot say that Bianca Maria is as earnest in the schoolroom as she is in the garden; indeed, I must admit that she is anything but advanced for her seven years in the rudiments of knowledge; that she writes, to use the Italian phrase, "like a cook"; that she reads with difficulty and seems hampered by an absolute incapacity to spell. But she has a wonderful mind for detail, and it is often more than I can do to give her, with any certainty, the information she desires. People who write and illustrate children's books too seldom satisfy their craving for detail and accuracy, as I have learned, alas, to my cost. *Why*, when the text says that Jane wore a sash had she no sash? and how was it that, after being expressly informed that Fred, the sailor boy, wore a whistle on a cord, did we look for the cord in vain? These things perplex and trouble Bianca Maria; indeed I do not think she has ever felt quite the same confidence in me since I told her, with an air of cheerful assurance, that, of two dolls represented in a picture, the one lying on the

floor was Clara, when subsequent examination proved it to be Kate. To her these are matters of momentous import: she studies every picture with earnest attention, pressing passionate kisses upon the round passive faces which adorn the pages of her primer, and appeals to me for all kind of information not supplied by the (to a child's mind entirely inadequate) text.

Bianca Maria does not, as I said before, possess as yet the pen of a ready writer, and all kinds of devices have to be resorted to to stimulate her in her arduous task. She finds great solace and encouragement in having some one beside her to cheer her with a continual and emphatic repetition of "up and down, and loop and turn, and up and down and up and down." It seems to act as a kind of charm upon her, for as soon as this species of incantation stops, Bianca Maria's pen stops also; she gazes pensively at her copybook and complains, according to the season, that the cold makes her hand stiff or the heat makes her "very sleep." One expedient which has been resorted to in the hope of quickening her energies is the promise of a lamb, a real living lamb, as soon as she can write a creditable copy and read a page (in one syllable, be it understood!) without a fault. This brilliant idea was suggested by Bianca Maria's keen interest in the flocks of sheep

which at certain seasons of the year pass almost daily by the Villa on their way from the mountains to the Maremma, or from the Maremma back into the hills. I need hardly say that this hope has not as yet been materialised, and, judging from her present achievements, I hardly know when it will be; but it affords a pleasant subject for conversation, and Bianca Maria bases many an agreeable project for the future upon the possession of her lamb. "I take it to walk, I; I give it to eat; it play with me in the garden; it will have the wool white and a blue ribbon round the neck and call itself 'Biancafiore,'" she tells me, mixing up the present and future tenses in her usual way, and raising her voice on the concluding word of each successive phrase. "And what shall you do when it grows into a big sheep?" I ask. Bianca Maria shrugs her shoulders with a little laugh. "Why, when it grow big and mamma wants not that it come in the house, I eat it. Ottavio will cook it; it will be very good!" The idea of first keeping a pet and then eating it was, I must confess, a shock to me, though I could not fail to see that Bianca Maria's, if a little wanting in sentiment, was the more reasonable view. What, after all, could be more satisfactory, a truer economy of both substance and sentiment, than first to love your lamb; to

rejoice in his youth, gaiety, and beauty; then, when he grows fat and lethargic and no longer appeals to your emotions, to eat him roasted, thus uniting him, physically as well as spiritually, to yourself? The logic was flawless—and yet it hardly convinced me. I felt that, foolish as it was, I should never feast willingly or gladly upon the future Biancafiore after rejoicing in his sprightly gambols; but I own that Bianca Maria is fortunate in not being a prey to sentimentality, and that her robust common-sense should save her from many of the pitfalls which lie in a woman's way through life.

Although Bianca Maria has as yet achieved no signal success with either pen or primer, there are some subjects which appeal to her, and one of these is history, if presented in a sufficiently attractive form. Indeed she and her cousins were so fired by a series of stories on the life and habits of the ancient Britons, no detail of which escaped them, that nothing would do but that they must build an "ancient Briton" house in the wood at the end of the garden, and that I must go with them straightway to choose the spot.

Out we set, therefore, to select a "desirable building site," the children insisting on accuracy in every point. It must be on the top of a hill, that they might not be attacked unawares by

any hostile tribes; it must be surrounded by a wood, that they might be as far as possible hidden from the enemy and sheltered from the storm. The copse fortunately supplied all these requirements, being a pleasant little thicket, where the yellow gorse grew thickly beneath the pines and oak-trees, and from which the ground fell away on all sides, affording a divine view of Florence and the whole Val d'Arno and the circling walls of hills.

There, with much labour, owing to the intense heat of the July days, we built a snug and creditable hut of dried broom and heather upon a stout foundation of pine poles, with the help of Orlando, always a sympathetic assistant in any of the children's plans.

Orlando is a good-looking young peasant, but somewhat spoiled by a squint; and in talking to him I am never able to decide whether his heart is really with the bright dark eye fixed respectfully upon my face, or with the one roving over the surrounding country; but he is an able helper in many of our enterprises, so I give him the benefit of the doubt.

Having built their house, the children were supremely happy playing in it. It was a fitting and romantic centre for all kinds of imaginative games. I, as the initiator of the scheme, was graciously invited to visit there, and entertained beside a fire of dried twigs (not lighted!) with

alfresco meals of the beans of the *ginestra* or broom.

As the little girls, whatever their outward appearance might be, were always occupying some new rôle every time I visited them, I found it prudent to inquire on arrival what they happened to be at that particular moment, so that I might be enabled to avoid indiscretions and enter into the spirit of the game. Once, for instance, I found Bianca Maria with a log of wood on each arm, and learned that these were twin infants and she a *Balia*. Passing half-an-hour later and finding her similarly employed, I politely asked after the health of the children, and was told that she was no longer a *Balia* but a butler, and that, as the duchess's baby turned into a pig, so these had changed into bottles of wine! These sudden transformations are, it is true, a little startling to a prosaic grown-up mind, but to Bianca Maria there is nothing in the least unusual in the process; she is everything most sincerely by turns, but nothing long.

Yet although she sees nothing comical in her own doings, her small cousin is a source of continual amusement to her, and she has always some fresh tale to tell of his doings. "That little Pio—it is so funny, poor little thing!" she remarks indulgently as she tells me of

some saying of his, and she assumes quite a matronly and protecting air where he is concerned.

Certainly Pio is a "funny little thing," as his cousin describes him, and possessed of many quaint and pretty ways. It was a sweet and touching instinct which prompted so tiny a boy, on being told that the dolls which his sisters were dressing were for the little sick children in the hospital, to say, "How much must cry the mothers of those children!" (*Come piangeranno le mamme di quei bambini!*) and, on another occasion, passing a pine-tree of which the branches had just been lopped, leaving round white scars from which the sap was oozing, to speak reproachfully to the woodmen, asking sternly if they did not see the tears flowing from "all those eyes." On being led away, a reluctant victim, to his afternoon sleep, I have seen Pio lay his hand upon each toy in turn, as in benediction, saying, "*Addio, cerchio! addio, cavallo!*" with the solemnity of one bidding a final farewell to earthly joys. Perhaps that is how, in some dim way, he feels; for I believe that what really makes children so rebellious against bedtime, so unwilling to obey the summons, is that they feel it to be in some sense a suspension of life—feel towards it a little as those called away in the noonday of youth

and activity and eager purpose and ambition do to death.

Bianca Maria, although the smallest of the children, with the exception of Pio, is quite a little personage, and holds her own among her cousins, not being in the least set upon one side or snubbed, as the youngest often is. Indeed, she is something of a leader among them; she has a way, quite unconsciously, of being in the foreground—or rather, the foreground is wherever she may be; and the others, recognising a dominant nature, defer to her judgment, and I am told that "Bianca Maria says this," or "Bianca Maria thinks that," many times a day. Her vivid imagination makes her greatly in request for all games, and I hear often imploring requests of "Oh, Bianca Maria, *be* a butcher!" or "*be* a horse!" as the case may be.

As a horse Bianca Maria is entirely satisfactory; it is a pleasure to see her, even when quite alone, prancing round the garden, vigorously whipping her own legs, curvetting, rearing, standing at ease, pawing the ground, all with the utmost seriousness. But never, perhaps, is she seen to greater advantage than in a "bull-fight," when she represents what she persists in calling a "Corridor," mounted upon Luisa as a mettlesome steed, while Vincenza enacts the rôle of a fiery bull, butting all within her

reach, and dying finally in agonies upon the floor before Anna, who, enthroned in a great brocaded chair, with a flower to bestow upon the victorious "Corridor," plays the part of audience with immense dignity and ceremonial clapping of hands.

Although Bianca Maria is sincerely attached to all her cousins, and especially to Pio, I believe that her warmest affection is lavished upon her dog Federigo, unless, perhaps, Federigo's children are even nearer to her heart.

Federigo is the survivor of a pair of *lupetti* or small Pomeranians, an unkind fate having recently left him a widower with four infants on his paws. His wife, a cheerful, pleasant little creature, had been shaved in the early summer, and went about very happily, looking like a fat wrinkled sausage, until the chill of the early autumn days, by which time her fur ought, by rights, to have grown again. But unfortunately its growth had not fulfilled our expectations; the flannel costume made for her proved a poor expedient; poor Cissie took a chill, and three days after the birth of her puppies, an attack of pneumonia carried her off. In this predicament a *balia* had to be hired immediately — a plebeian, officious, warm-hearted little animal, who took kindly to the babies, but gave some offence by her *prepo-*

tente manner of barking at any one who ventured into her corridor, even the sorrowing father; thus overstepping, in an access of zeal, the strict limits of duty which her position had imposed.

Federigo, in this season of affliction, proved a most affectionate parent, paying frequent visits to his offspring, and bestowing upon them paternal caresses with a warm pink tongue; but whether or not it was owing to his loss, he seemed to grow a little pensive in those days —he had always been of an emotional and sentimental temperament—and in his bereavement he attached himself more closely than ever to Bianca Maria, whom he could hardly bear to have out of his sight: he slept upon her bed at night, he sat beside her chair at lessons, he accompanied us out walking; and his mistress described to me a radiant future when Federigo's children should have reached weeks of discretion and be, like their father, always about our path and about our bed!

Before this happy hour arrived, however, the day came for our return from the country, and our time was much occupied with preparations for what Bianca Maria called the "voyage."

Her own were of the simplest description, as her much-loved volume of *Pierino Porcospino* (an Italian edition of the *Struwwelpeter*)

was the only piece of luggage with which she burdened herself, leaving all such prosaic details as shoes, frocks, and pinafores to Alduina's care; but she was most alacritous in lending me her assistance in my arrangements—her idea of "helping to pack" being to hover over my things like a moth, examining and asking a dozen questions about each in turn, or running up and down stairs with a paper label bearing in tipsy capitals the inscription *facchino* on her hat.

At last all was ready; a touching leave was taken of Lucy and Verdiana, both of whom Bianca Maria had been with difficulty persuaded would "find themselves better" in the country than in town. *Pierino Porcospino* was packed; Mr. Brown was packed; Federigo (whose family did *not* accompany him!) was strapped into the scarlet leather braces which form his travelling costume. The cousins crowded round with their good-byes, Bianca Maria pressed into each hand a *porte enfant* as a keepsake; Cesare whipped up his horses, and we rolled away down the long hill between the olives, another *villeggiatura* over, the city once more claiming us as its own.

But a thing even when ended may live in memory, and that our golden summer is not forgotten some of the stories in this book are

proof: while as for the friendship which sprang up between Bianca Maria and me, if it was of mushroom growth it was not of mushroom duration; her quaint little personality has been interwoven since then with many a page of my recollections both in town and country, and my little "White Mary," with the grey eyes in which youth is as fresh as the first leaves which burst forth after a night of rain in April, with the face like an innocent white flower, the broken English and sweet old-fashioned ways, will always be one of the most tenderly remembered of my many Tuscan friends.

III

PASQUALINA

WHEN I first saw Pasqualina she was one week old, and lay tightly swaddled in the great bed beneath her *arcuccio*, feebly flicking the dangling bell to and fro with tiny, aimless hands.

"What beautiful blue eyes!" I remarked, anxious to show myself appreciative of this first girl in a family of six boys; but no sooner were the words out of my mouth than I repented, for Assunta hastened to correct my error and to set me right.

"*Ma no*, Signorina," she said reprovingly, "they will become black like those of her brothers; we have no white eyes in our family, *grazie a Dio!*" and I remembered that the blue eyes which we admire are considered by the peasants almost a disfigurement, so that my intended compliment had been a serious *faux pas*.

There had certainly been no delay about admitting the new-born baby to the fold of the Church and giving her a Christian name, as before she was three hours old she had been borne off to be baptized, bound upon a

pillow and tightly swaddled, with a cap upon the wee bald head. On the point of immediate baptism the peasants are extremely punctilious, believing that if the child should die before christening it would go to the "Limbo" instead of to the blessed Paradiso, and so they hurry the poor mite off to church to be made a Christian, and thus ensured against all danger after death and against all danger in this life from witchcraft, since it is believed that witches and such ill-wishers have no power over that which has been signed with the sign of the cross. The same writer who tells us of this superstition relates also the quaint practice of Tuscan mothers of giving a decoction of house-leek (*Sempervivum tectorum*) to children on the first Friday after birth, as this is supposed to ward off convulsions and ensure long life.

A quaint little bundle Pasqualina looked lying there; indeed she resembled a parcel more nearly than anything else, the only parts of her small person allowed any freedom being her arms and head. A long band of stiff-corded material (upon which is often interwoven *Gioia mia*, *Idolo mio*, *Delizia*, or some such term of endearment) is wound tightly round and round from the feet to the armpits; and still in some parts of Italy—*generally* in olden days, as may be seen in ancient pictures—the

arms are swaddled as well. Some mothers cover the swathing bands with a little frock; but the majority do not in any way disguise the rigid, parcel-like form of their babies, which, stiff as a parsnip, can be safely laid down in any convenient place or entrusted to small brothers and sisters with little fear of injury to fragile bones.

The *arcuccio* under which Pasqualina lay is a contrivance in use almost all over Tuscany with peasant mothers, and is probably as old as the hills. It is an open, ark-shaped frame of wooden laths, which lifts the weight of the bedclothes from the child, and, while keeping it warm, prevents any fear of suffocation. Indeed it is so useful and practical a contrivance as to be well worth adoption in the poorer homes of England, if it were not that the English peasant or artisan is generally distrustful of new customs, slow to think that the usages of an alien people can in any way compare with his own.

Pasqualina certainly seemed to be very small to be left alone in a world to which she had been introduced so lately; but her mother, who the very morning of the baby's birth had been cutting grass and drawing water, was already at work in the fields again, it being the vintage season, when all hands are needed;

and so she was left in the great family bed, a tiny feeble creature, to lie and suck her thumb or sleep or cry through the long hours in the warmth and dark.

There was immense pride in Assunta's eyes as she took up and exhibited the baby. Certainly Pasqualina was an important little personage, arriving, as she did, after half-a-dozen boys; for though the peasants much prefer boys as a rule, one girl after six made a pleasant variety, since it is possible to have even too much of a good thing. In this case there was no looking to see if Pasqualina had hidden in her neck the little tail of hair which popular superstition asserts to be a sign that the baby is "calling her brothers," and that the next child will be a boy. Assunta declared frankly that now she had one girl she was satisfied: seven children was enough! an opinion with which I could not but agree.

But where a *maschietto* is ardently desired after the birth of several sisters, much importance is attached to this sign of the *Codina*, and many proofs are cited of cases in which the prophecy came true.

Pasqualina appeared to be a friendly little creature in so far as she could be said at a week old to have any characteristics whatever; she manifested no unwillingness to let me nurse

her, and even gave me a smile—if such it could be called in so young a baby; one of those sudden, fleeting smiles which the Tuscan peasants call *benedetto*, perhaps from some such belief as leads the Andalusians to say that when a child smiles in his sleep it is because he sees his guardian angel beside him, visible to him alone.

The home which was to be Pasqualina's was in a fold of the hills, far from the clamour of a busy and progressive world, among surroundings serene, lovely, and austere. The mountain walls rose up to the soft blue sky which vaulted the Happy Valley as the blue mantle which, in many an ancient picture, Madonna extends in protection above her children's heads. Here and there on the neighbouring slopes were scattered little white farms, low-roofed, among the vines and chestnuts and the olives in their terraced rows—farms such as, seen in the quiet light of the summer evening, one might imagine a fit setting for the home-life of Nazareth. All around lay a fresh green world, and beyond—far beyond—the end of the Happy Valley the broad luminous spaces, the wide horizon of the Tuscan hills. It was a religious landscape; it held stillness, silence, and space; yet I doubt if those who lived in it, who possessed daily the inestimable privi-

lege of looking out upon a world so fair, appreciated it in the smallest degree—ever, indeed, gave it a moment's thought. Truly it is a pitiable thing to have one's sense of beauty blunted, though worse never to have possessed it at all. Why is it, one wonders, that these upland farms, these " high places " of the earth, do not produce more artistic and poetic souls in these modern days? Why do we never find a Giotto, with his soul full of dreams, in the boy keeping his sheep on the hillside in a world so lovely as surely to arrest and inspire the dullest soul? Why are those who live there habitually so blind to the quiet loveliness which lies among the olives, so narrow and material and apathetic, thinking of nothing beyond the corn in the granary and the wine in the press, of nothing beyond the sowing and reaping, the planting and pruning, which make up the sum of their daily lives? A few prayers half-understood in the little church on Sunday, a few truths dimly comprehended, a tiny lamp burning before the picture of Madonna in the old dark kitchen, a sprig of olive blessed by the priest and hung at the bed-head, a crucifix displayed before their failing eyes as they drift out into the final darkness: these are almost the only things which raise them above the beasts they tend.

As the *villeggiatura* ends soon after the vintage, it was nearly a year before I again saw Pasqualina, but she did not seem to have thriven in the pure mountain air, being a puny little thing, lately freed from her *fasce*, with enormous pale blue eyes (which had *not* turned black, though I knew better than to comment on the fact!), and sudden fleeting smiles on her pitiful little face.

All her six brothers were running about shoeless, on tough little brown feet; but Pasqualina—the only one of the family who never put foot to the ground, and therefore the one apparently in least need of them—wore a minute pair of red kid boots of about a finger's length. But I soon learned that Pasqualina's apparent independence of shoes was the very reason why she was so honoured; indeed when she was of an age to walk and wear out shoe-leather, she would without doubt have none to wear out but that of her own small feet.

I sat down to rest on the low wall which surrounded the *aia* while the sun shone through the vine-pergola with varied and mysterious play of light and shade, and Pasqualina, seated upon my knee, sucked the coral horn hung round her neck as a protection against witchcraft, and gazed at me thoughtfully with immense, unsmiling eyes. I had wondered at first how

a child in that perfect air could look so sickly, so unlike the fat brown thing which is one's conventional conception of a peasant baby; but I no longer wondered when I saw her gravely eating a large raw chestnut, and ventured to remonstrate with Assunta upon a diet so extremely unsuited to a person of Pasqualina's age. But she did not see any force in my argument; I might have as well spoken to the deaf adder which stoppeth her ears. The *poverina* liked it; there were so few things she *would* eat, if the Signorina knew! Milk? *che! che!* she could never get her to take it, though coffee she liked. Evidently Assunta knew nothing whatever of the mutual action of cause and effect, nor dreamed that, in the case of a baby, unhealthy feeding might establish a desire for unhealthy food.

She was a good-hearted woman, though incorrigibly stupid, and by no means the conventional "merry peasant," being one of those who "love melancholy better than laughing"; but she forgot her grievances for a few minutes to admire some small wooden animals I had brought for Pasqualina, while as for Pietro, the father (a big man with the fine aquiline features which tell of an ancient race), he went into ecstasies at the sight.

"Pare proprio nato!" (It seems really born)

he cried delightedly, as he surveyed a dappled horse with a fiery eye, a neck arched like a stately Greek statue, and a flowing wooden tail.

It grieved me to see Pasqualina looking so sickly, for many babies that summer had made their first and last journey to the little Campo Santo, and I tried, but in vain, to see what good advice and condensed milk could do for this tiny fragile life.

Poor little Pasqualina, she never had time to wear out her red kid shoes; for a week or two later I found Pietro and Assunta working sadly together in the fields, digging side by side in dumb, patient sorrow, while the old grandmother minded her at home.

"Ah, Signorina," said poor Assunta as, having kicked off the wooden-soled boot from her spade-foot, she walked back with me through the *podere* that I might see the baby. "She was too good and beautiful to live, *un vero occhio di sole*, and that is why Dominiddio is taking the *angiolino* away!"

Personally I thought that the raw chestnuts and other unsuitable food might have quite as much to do with it as the superlative charm of Pasqualina; but it was too late now for advice, and in this case it seemed best to keep silence even from good words.

We passed across the fields, so soon to be gay with all the vintage activity as they had been when Pasqualina appeared upon the scenes, and up the old stone steps into the dim kitchen, where, in the great chimney corner, the grandmother, a brown, wrinkled old woman who might have served as a model for one of the Three Fates, sat holding the baby on her knee. She looked very small and shrunken; there was little doubt that this tiny pilgrim had but a few steps more to make in life's journey, and yet it hardly occurred to me that it would be so soon. Indeed, it was a surprise when the next day a message came to the Villa to ask if the Signorina would go up as Pasqualina was dead.

It is a tremendous moment, that which inevitably comes sooner or later to all of us, when, for the first time, we meet death face to face. It must always be a shock, even when not in the person of some one very dear to us, and I dreaded this visit which I had not had the heart to refuse.

The old farm seemed strangely silent in the golden light of the September afternoon as I came upon it through the olives; silver mists lay folded in every hollow, ready to creep out with the twilight; the vines were bending beneath their load of grapes. As I passed the

byre I saw Pietro feeding the oxen; he looked sad and dejected, and did his work without any of his accustomed gaiety and song; but the peasant has no leisure to nurse his sorrow—that is a luxury of the rich—and the round of commonplace daily duties must be gone through although the dark angel casts the shadow of his wings upon the house.

In the kitchen, crouching over the log which smouldered on the hearth, sat the grandmother, with the elder children huddled around her, awed by something which they but dimly understood. In her eyes was that dumb, patient expression so often seen in the faces of the old and poor, be they animal or human. Perhaps she wondered in her dull way why it was that she, who had known eighty years of life, its toil and sorrow, and would gladly have laid down her burden, should have been left while the baby was taken. Certainly it might well seem a mystery to wiser heads than hers.

Ah, yes, she murmured when I spoke to her, the *angiolino* was in the blessed *Paradiso*, and it must be good to be there, since no one who went ever came back again! There was a wistfulness in the quavering voice which told me how willingly she would have risen and followed if the summons had come to her instead of to the little child.

The priest had been there when Pasqualina died, they told me, and this, for their sakes, I was glad to hear; for although the peasants do not think the doctor at all indispensable in serious illness, they set much store by the priest's presence, and would think it terrible to die without the last rites of the Church. It was a real consolation to them that the baby had had the *olio santo*, had been blessed and sprinked with holy water, had had the stole laid upon the bed as a symbol that she died in the arms of the Church, and all other ceremonies, so that there could be no doubt that she had gone into the *Paradiso*—though I do not think there could have been any in any case, even without these special blessings of the Church.

Poor Assunta asked presently if I would not like to see the *angiolino?* she looked very *tranquilla* she told me through her tears as she led me from the kitchen into the bedroom beyond, the bedroom where Pasqualina and I had met for the first time just a year before.

The poor little room, with its bundles of old clothes hanging on the walls, its bed, its *cassetta*, and its few burning candles, was solemnised by the presence of that tiny still figure in the middle of the great bed. Pasqualina had never been so impressive in her life as she was now in her death. Two days before I had

held her in my arms and laughed over her as she smiled up at me; now I trembled before her, as all must, at some time or other, have trembled in the presence of death. She had no longer any need of her *arcuccio;* warmth and cold had become to her alike.

I could hear the stifled sobs as Assunta crept across the floor and turned back the sheet which covered the little form. The evening light stole in and paled the candle flames, and rested softly upon the tiny grey face to which death had lent such strange dignity. There was something curiously remote in this baby, who had fathomed the mysterious secrets of death. The face was set in an inscrutable calm; the small brown hands were folded on the breast. What was it, I wondered, as I looked, that those closed eyes had seen and which had stamped the awful solemnity on the chilly brow? What icy kiss had sealed the three-cornered mouth in that calm line?

It was very still. From the next room came the slow monotonous ticking of that pride of the family, the alarum-clock, and the subdued voices of the other children; from the bed the choking sobs of Assunta, who had thrown herself, in an agony of grief, across her baby's feet. The presence of Death, the rider upon the pale horse, is always solemn; it was with a

sense of awe that I stooped and kissed the brow and touched the tiny hand.

Assunta had by-and-by a petition to make through her tears. To-morrow evening would be the *trasporto* (carrying away). It was their custom to tie a ribbon round the waist of the dead, and whoever made a knot in this ribbon would be remembered in the prayers of the blessed one in Paradise. But they were poor, and had no ribbon. Would the Signorina be so good as to give an old one, if it was not too much to ask?

Of course it was not, I assured her; so I chose a piece of soft pale blue, and we all, even Bianca Maria, put a knot in it, just in case the little innocent soul, freshly arrived among the blessed, should remember us; and sent it up—the last ornament Pasqualina would ever need.

I believe that poor Assunta felt some comfort in the fact that her baby should be buried in the gift of the "illustrious ones"; certainly she was effusive in her thanks, and they bound the ribbon upon the tiny still figure and carried Pasqualina upon an open bier that all might look for the last time upon the small wax-white face. She wore her best frock and pinafore, poor baby, and even the red kid boots upon the tiny feet which had never learned to toddle; for shrouds

are not customary in Italy, every one being buried in their best.

The men of the village *compagnia*, in their white ephods, carried her; the women and children following with lighted candles; and at the gate of the Villa they paused that we might look for the last time upon the peaceful little figure wreathed round with a great garland of many-coloured flowers, and holding one rose-bud, out of Bianca Maria's own garden, in the folded hands. It must have been just such a procession, with the open bier, the lighted candles, that San Zenobi met in the Borgo degli Albizi, when he raised that child of the Albizi family, the scene of which we see, painted by Domenico Ghirlandajo, in the Uffizi; or as passed through the Piazza Santa Trinità, carrying to burial that other child of the Spini family whom the Blessed Francis restored to life, as is depicted on the walls of Santa Trinità.

From the terrace we watched the few candles of the humble procession winding among the olives in the violet and grey and misty blue of the September evening which ended Pasqualina's twelvemonths' sojourn at the upland farm. Certainly she had never been half so important in her life as she now was in her death; but Death lends something of its own

sublimity and dignity to all whom it makes its own.

The funeral was soon over; the bells which had chimed across the valley were silent; the tapers burned down; the priest passed the gate going homewards, his office over; the mourners made their way back to the farm where, among so many, one—and that such a small and helpless one—would hardly be missed for very long in the stress of daily toil; and only a tiny mound, invisible in the darkness, witnessed to the brief life when, late that night, I looked across the moonlit fields to the little cemetery where, with the quiet eyes of the stars keeping watch above her, for the first time Pasqualina slept alone.

IV

SISTO

I HARDLY know to what extent I may claim Sisto as my friend, since we have had but scant conversation or interchange of ideas; he being too shy for much intimacy and I having but little opportunity to woo him with the craft of smiles. Still, he always "shows himself friendly" by timid greetings and by a fervent devotion to the well-being of my overshoes, which he has taken under his especial protection, and which I find him, in his spare moments, busy polishing with a wet rag; so that, all these things taken into consideration, I think I may safely include this quaint little figure among my Tuscan friends.

Sisto is about seven years old, the only son of his mother, and she a widow. His papal-sounding title he takes from a certain Uncle Sisto, a *frate;* and with so priestly a name it seems but fitting that, on attaining years of discretion, he should gratify his mother's fond desire and become a priest. Indeed, there seems no other calling so entirely suited to a widow's only son, as in that case all fear of his

marrying would be precluded, and Reparata might hope to find a home with him in her old age when her cooking days are done.

Sisto, personally, has a leaning towards the more secular profession of a footman, and I must admit that his extreme neatness seems to indicate a certain vocation for that life. Never, indeed, have I seen a cleaner, tidier little boy than he. His brown face is as shiny as soap and water, vigorously applied, can make it; his blue overall, with his name embroidered on the breast in scarlet crewels, is guiltless of a stain; the copybooks in which he laboriously inscribes his pot-hooks — pot-hooks which merely to behold is a pleasure — are without a blemish; and when his mother inadvertently spilled some ink one day upon one of them, Sisto's distress became positively hysterical until consoled by a new *quaderno* with the immaculate cover which his orderly soul desired.

Sisto, in the days when Reparato first came to reign in the kitchen, was boarded out at a small baker's shop in the *paese*, and there I conclude his mother—carrying, like Hannah, the garments prepared in her leisure moments —visited him when she went to do her daily *spese* for the house. In any case, wherever Sisto was, he was not at the Villa, and I was

hardly aware of his existence until one day Reparata appeared to receive the orders with extremely red eyes, and, in answer to her mistress's inquiries, gasped out—dabbing off the tears one by one with a tightly rolled handkerchief—that her *bambino* was ill; the little angel did not eat; his eyes watered; he had not the will to play; as for his nose, it was red like a cherry—and at the mention of this last distressing symptom her grief was redoubled and her tears coursed down so fast that the grimy little handkerchief-ball was hardly in time to catch them as they fell.

Now Reparata's *padrona* being one of those kind and generous-natured people whose aim in life seems to be the drying of as many tears and the calling up of as many smiles as possible, suggested that Sisto should be brought up to the Villa and kept under his mother's eye until his nose should resume its normal colour. Thus it was, to Reparata's immense joy, that Sisto first came among us; and so unobtrusive was his presence in the house, so sympathetic the views of the *padrona* about the separation of a widowed parent from an only child, that although the last time I saw Sisto his nose—a remarkably large one—was as white as a turnip, he is still at the Villa and seems likely to remain.

SISTO

Sisto, though he has a funny little face with enormous black eyes, is undeniably not dowered with the fatal gift of beauty, and it is quite pathetic to hear the immense pride with which poor Reparata discants, at the slightest encouragement, upon his virtue and good looks.

"Ah, Signorina," she exclaimed one day with enthusiasm (it was the day when she had been exhibiting his pot-hooks and relating the accident to the copybook), "E propria una coppa d' oro, quel bambino!" and I felt that beyond calling Sisto a golden cup it would be hard for praise to go.

Reparata, like a large majority of her country-people in a land where every tiny town or village has its own traditions, its own great families, even if these have since fallen from their high estate, is immensely proud of her lineage, being of an ancient family in the Val di Chiana and possessing by right—what so many only get for money!—a coat of arms. This she keeps hung up in the kitchen, and, in due course, will hand on to Sisto, that the ancestral glories may not pass out of mind.

The proud position of this crest above the kitchen mantelpiece is, I fear, a bitter mortification to Caterina the housemaid, of an equally proud and ancient line, since a distressing acci-

dent has prevented her arms from flaunting their colours on the opposite wall.

Caterina and her husband—who is butler in a neighbouring villa—had had their crests united upon one shield, and, both being in service and the children under the care of the nuns in a convent, had committed their treasure to a friend, who pledged herself to guard it carefully in her own house until such time as they should come to claim it back. This unprincipled person having moved without giving them warning, carried off the *stemma* with her, and they have been unable to trace her, which troubles them dreadfully on account of the children; for how is it possible to preserve the prestige of an ancient family when the outward and visible sign of its nobility is lost? I sympathised deeply with Caterina—a small, pale, nervous woman — when I heard the story, knowing from experience the pride of race which lingers in the hearts of these people. Had not her husband's family, as she told me, been for seven hundred years living on the land of one of the noblest of the Italian families and always mentioned in its annals? and yet now her children must be defrauded of their crest! I, a signorina of heart, and much distinguished, could understand, she added, how grave was the misfortune, and appreciate how great a

wrong that infamous one had done! and even as she poured out the story I perceived the additional pang caused by the gilded splendours of Reparata's arms.

But to return to Sisto. One of the great events, the reddest of red-letter days in his life hitherto has been, I believe, his one glimpse into the magic world of the drama, under the very mild form of some *tableaux vivants* organised in haste.

All the servants were thrown into a state of nervous excitement by the unwonted preparations and by the permission of their mistress to come in when the guests were seated and look on from the back of the room, provided they made no noise; and Sisto, especially, was full of curiosity as to what mysterious things the *signorini* were going to do. Had he not heard messages sent down to the kitchen for all kinds of miscellaneous properties such as his own observations told him had as a rule no place in the *salotti* of the great? What use could the illustrious ones have for a *conca* —that huge earthenware vessel in which lemon-trees may be planted or clothes be washed? Why should they desire a basin of flour—raw material which surely should not leave the kitchen until converted by his mother's skilful hands into cakes and pies? And what was all

this talk of *quadri viventi?* Were there not pictures in his spelling-book and above the church altar, and how could a picture be alive?

Certainly it was all very puzzling and perplexing to a rustic seven-year-old, whose only experience of the ways of *signorini* was gained by glimpses through the open drawing-room door as he stole up to bed, noiseless as a little mouse, in his stockinged-feet—for since he possessed no slippers, Reparata had decreed that, it not being fitting that the illustrious ones should hear him moving, he must dispense, in the house, with any shoes at all.

When the eventful evening came Sisto doffed his pinafore and appeared in an elegant sailor suit of blue merino with gold buttons, and a silk scarf tied in an aggressive bow beneath his ugly little face. His delight in the tableaux passed all bounds, though before the picture of "Flora," when not only the walls were covered but the floor was strewn with roses, his prudent soul was grieved at such wasteful use of what might have decked the house for a week. He was chiefly impressed by my appearance as a statue, and for days afterwards amused himself by posing in an attitude as nearly as possible resembling the Signorina's, though I cannot but think that

the position which my ample white draperies rendered natural, even becoming, must have been extremely comical when reproduced by Sisto's small figure in a tight blue pinafore and hobnailed boots.

In spite of his regard, even affection, for the mistress of the house, Sisto is at heart, I believe, a staunch little republican; and although he bids us *buona sera* whenever he meets us, though it be at every turn of the garden path, and would not think of retiring after the delivery of a message without the courteous formula of *a rivederci*, even if he knew that he was to return at the end of five minutes, he does not raise his cap, but stands covered in our presence, unlike the gardener's boy Cecchino, who is a born courtier, and removes his ragged hat with a bow and flourish which would do honour to a lord.

Poor Cecchino! the presence of Sisto in the house for so long a time aroused some jealousy and hurt feeling in his childish heart; for it was hard that this newcomer should be privileged to dust, to clean goloshes, and even to carry up letters to the Signorina before himself, the tried friend of many years; and when one day the *padrona*, who had known Cecchino since his birth, put her arm round him, saying, "this is my oldest friend," and kissed him, he cuddled

up to her, murmuring *Si! si!* and almost weeping with emotion at the recognition which his loyal soul desired.

I do not think that many presents can have fallen to Sisto's lot in his somewhat poverty-clouded life, for the smallest gift arouses in him a joy which is positively touching; he is profoundly grateful for and genuinely delighted with the veriest crumbs of this world's goods.

The Signora one day bestowed upon him an old pocket-knife, saying, half in fun, "You must give me something in exchange, Sisto, or it will bring bad luck!" Sisto nodded assent shyly, his eyes shining with triumph as he gazed at the treasure in his hand. Half-an-hour later a timid knock at the door was heard, and, in response to the cry of *avanti!* Sisto entered, carrying a large waiter, in the centre of which reposed a two centime piece, polished to its utmost capacity, which he had come to offer in return for the knife. "It must be his own money!" he had insisted to his mother; so his one coin, long-hoarded, was cleaned up that it might be worthy of so high a purpose, and that the whole transaction might be the more dignified, it was offered on a tray. The knife afforded Sisto the most exquisite delight, and when he discovered that it possessed two blades his joy knew no bounds, though prudence led

him to decide that it was an unfit plaything for so small a boy, and to confide it to his mother's care, only refreshing his eyes with a peep at it from time to time.

Another gift which raised him to a tenth heaven of delight was a realistic bird of coloured cotton-wool, overlaid in places with real feathers, and standing firmly upon a pair of stout wire legs. This creature flew or crept very near his heart, and he was seen walking round the garden talking to it affectionately, it being subsequently discovered that he believed that it would attract and bring him into closer fellowship with the other birds.

But we have all had impressed upon us since our nursery days that giving is better than receiving, and the time when Sisto tasted bliss as never before was at Capo d' Anno, when, quivering with suppressed excitement, he came upstairs to present his New-Year gift.

Of course every one had made a present to the *padrona* at or since Christmas: Leopoldo the gardener and his wife Maria had brought an offering of apples and lemons; the peasants had brought eggs and highly polished pears; Settimo, Caterina's butler-husband, a pyramidal bouquet, every flower of which was wired in the most uncompromising manner, and the whole surrounded by an elegant paper frill.

Naturally, in Reparata's eyes, it was but fitting that Sisto should make an offering in token of his gratitude for the many benefits conferred upon him — and however small her means might be, no one should deny that it was a handsome one when made.

A timid knock advised us of Sisto's coming, and as there was no answer nor movement in response to the permission to enter, I opened the door, and revealed him standing on the mat. He wore a new black and white *scozzese* pinafore—made, doubtless, for the occasion—of a particularly large design of that plaid so dear to Italian hearts. In both hands he clasped a dish, upon which, bedded with layers of paper, reposed a triumph of the pastrycook's art—a large album, entirely realistic in every detail, from its gilded edges to the covers of almond toffee which represented calf-skin, and the "*Buon Anno*, 1907," emblazoned in white sugar on its side.

Sisto entered solemnly, never raising his eyes from the precious object for which his poor mother, watching in suppressed excitement from the background, must have paid a heavy price. Walking with much circumspection, he advanced towards his *padrona*, and shyly laid it on her knee, smiling bashfully while she gave expression to her wonder and delight.

Undoubtedly so delectable an offering was enough to soften even a hard heart—and Reparata's signora has a particularly tender one. In any case, it is certain that since his amazing New Year present I have heard no more talk of Sisto being sent off to board at the gardener's, nor of the length of his stay being regulated by the colour of his nose. I have even heard some vague suggestions of "buttons" in the dim and splendid future, and it is evident that Sisto, by some effective but never fully defined process, has ceased to be a visitor, and has become one of ourselves.

V

A BAPTISM

IT was no laughing matter! the baby screamed until he was purple in the face, as if he had been an *anima dannata* instead of a newly-blessed son of the Church. The whole Baptistery rang with his anguish while the majestic, scarlet-ribboned *balia* promenaded him in desperation up and down the worn old pavement, from the lovely designs of which, it is said, that the ancient Guild of Silk took the pattern for its first brocades.

Perhaps it was the salt in his mouth which had perturbed his infant spirit, or the long string of saintly names with which they had saddled him; or perhaps, according to the popular belief, it was the devil departing—in which case all was for the best, as the devil was evidently a lusty one, and the result might have been disastrous if he had remained inside. In any case, he was only two days old, so might be excused for making so unseemly a disturbance in a holy place, as what can be expected when the Church insists on bringing infants of scarcely forty-eight hours from their warm

beds to the great chilly Baptistery, and there vexing their spirits, doubtless for their ultimate good, with oil and water, candles and salt.

The Florentine Baptistery is one of the most interesting places in the whole city; its immense antiquity is in strange contrast to the tiny, frail lives which pass daily in and out of its great bronze doors.

Built probably in the sixth century, under the Lombards, of stones taken from far older buildings, it was dedicated by the Queen Theodolinde to St. John the Baptist, henceforth to be the patron of the Florentine people, as he already was of her own.

In the beginning it served as both cathedral and baptistery; and that it was the pride of the city is proved by Dante, the great exile, who retained the memory of his "bel San Giovanni" through both his earthly wanderings and that mysterious journey between hell and heaven. In the *Inferno* he recalls how he once broke one of the four fonts which, three or four feet deep, stood there until 1576, to save Antonio dei Cavicciuoli, a Florentine boy, who, in the crowd gathered on Holy Saturday to light their tapers at the Easter candle, fell in and would have been drowned but for the poet's prompt help. It was the sight, in his descent of "the livid rock, all pierced with

many a hole, all of one size," which reminds him of—

> "Those stones which in my beautiful St. John
> Are found, where priests baptize each infant soul,
> Whereof, not many years back, I broke one,
> To save a child that lay a-drowning there."

There has always been in Florence one baptismal font for the whole city. All the great men of these many centuries, therefore; all the women whose beauty artists painted and poets sang, must have been carried into this ancient round church, where even the summer heats are tempered and the light comes a little dimly through the small windows, set deep in the massive walls.

The solemn mosaics with their impassive faces, which look down now between the scaffolding that fills the roof of the Baptistery, from the place where Gaddo Gaddi and old Andrea Tafi and his rougish apprentice set them, must have looked down upon the Donati as they brought the babies who were to grow respectively into the truculent Corso, and his sister, that gentle Piccarda, who now dwells high in Paradise. They saw Folco Portinari's girl become Beatrice, to all generations blessed, and the young Alighieri bear to the font that swaddled baby whose name of Dante was to echo through the world.

Another sight they might have seen, but for the lofty spirit of the poet, who scornfully refused when his townsfolk offered a grudging reversal of his sentence of exile if he would humble himself to implore pardon, barefooted and candle in hand, in his beautiful St. John.

The terms were too hard. Dante, although he loved Florence better than all earthly places, would not creep back in the white garb of a penitent to the city which had cast him out. So he died, sad and weary, in Ravenna; and the city which had scorned him in life came to beg vainly for the honour of possessing his bones in death.

Into this old Baptistery Piero dei Medici brought his boys, Lorenzo and Giuliano—the one to fall young under the Pazzi knives; the other, winning for himself the title of "Magnificent," to make of the city a splendid slave. And here the infant Caterina, only legitimate heir of the Medicean glories, must have been hurried in those gloomy days while her father lay dying and her young French mother already dead.

It is matter for profound regret that, although every infant Florentine through so many generations has been carried to this same Baptistery to be made Christian, their baptisms have not always been registered, and for centuries there is

no written evidence of those who were brought to the font.

Until 1407 the priests kept a primitive register, by simply dropping into a box a black bean for every boy and a white for every girl —a system which often led to confusion, and, even when kept accurately, was of little use.

In 1407 the captains of the Misericordia decreed that their notary should register in a large volume every child born in the city and every person baptized in San Giovanni; but these old books unfortunately perished in 1557 in a flood of the Arno.

The first general decree which ordered the registration of all baptisms was issued by the Council of Trent; but the Florentines have an anterior one, dating from the synod of 1517, and the Florentine records date even so far back as November 4, 1450. But, alas, for the early days of Dante and the Donati and the Cavalcanti and Uberti! of them our knowledge rests only upon tradition, general usage, the statements of witnesses, or family records.

There are many quaint rites and ceremonies connected with a Florentine baptism, not only at the time, but in preparation, and one of these takes place on Easter Eve, when the archbishop blesses the font for the coming year. The stone basin is filled with water, which

is first divided in the form of a cross, then redivided and thrown to the four points of the compass. Three times the celebrant breathes on it, and, dipping the paschal candle three times into the water, says, "May the power of the Holy Ghost descend into the fulness of this font!"

The newly-blessed water is then sprinkled on the heads of the people, and the oil of catechumens and the oil of chrism are poured into the font and mixed with the water, during all which rites suitable prayers are recited, the service closing with the Litany of the Saints.

The baptism itself is a quaint and pretty sight, and there is much symbolism in the service which, if reverently performed, would be both impressive and beautiful; but Italian priests have an unedifying way of gabbling through their offices with wandering eyes and apparently an utter indifference to the business on hand.

As I sat in the Baptistery that afternoon while the newly-made Piero-Filippo-Alessandro-Giuseppe-Maria made his lusty protest against priestly doings until his carriage could be hastily called to convey him home, quite an army of babies arrived to be received into the Church.

In no case was the mother present, as in the

natural course of things it is impossible that she should be, for although—especially among the upper classes—baptism is occasionally deferred for three or four weeks, the usual time is when the child is only two days old.

Some of the babies arrived in a carriage and pair, and were borne in, among a party of friends, by a *balia* of enormous dignity, the infant itself wrapped in clouds of silk and lace; some were muffled in old shawls, and when unfolded looked like roly-polies tied in a cloth; for although the habit of swaddling has died out among the upper classes, it still prevails among the poor.

I spoke to a woman who stood beside me, holding a small swaddled bundle, which she told me was her niece. The unlucky mite had not been very welcome, for there were already seven at home, and the mother, poor soul! had burnt many wax candles to Madonna in hopes that the *Padre Eterno* might be induced to take the baby back. He had done nothing of the kind, however; and it had finally arrived, so dark a little creature that they had brought it to the old Baptistery to name it "Nerina"! She, the godmother, had presented the child with a ten-centime stamp and a *soldo* rosary as a christening gift; but the godfather, who she told me was a greengrocer without family,

and quite a *pezzo grosso*, had given no less than a franc—so that Nerina would start in life with the handsome sum of elevenpence towards her "dot"!

Evidently her parents had done well for her in their selection of a godfather; but the choosing of godparents often becomes a mere farce, as it is not unusual for the sponsor to be a brother or sister of five or six years old. Should a little cousin of another sex undertake this duty, however, it must be remembered that sponsorship constitutes a real relationship, and that no future marriage between the two children would be possible without a special dispensation of the Pope.

Although only three names may be registered for a child at the Municipality, there is no limit to the number which may be given in church, provided that all are saintly ones; and the Roman Church venerates an army of saints so unlimited, that it is hard to find a name on which the calendar has not set its hall-mark of worth.

That the Italians avail themselves of this privilege of multiplying names, I certainly had abundant proof that afternoon, listening to lists which would have seemed a little exaggerated even for a prince of the blood; and I am sure that many a child — not excluding Bianca

Maria—is bewildered if suddenly called upon to give its list of names.

At last came the turn of Nerina, whom I watched with interest as she was carried forward to the priest, while the assistant held a lighted candle, emblem of the Gospel light of truth. Then followed a long indistinct murmur of Latin on the part of the priest, punctuated by the godparents (at the prompting of the assistant) with responses of "Credo" and "Amen."

Salt was thrust between the lips—the emblem of incorruptibility and wisdom, and also as a symbol of the evil of the world which the child must taste; and this was followed by the ceremony of the "saliva"—witnessing which I could sympathise with Mary Queen of Scots when, at the baptism of Prince James, she refused to allow it, protesting, "No priest shall spit in my child's mouth!"

The oil of catechumens was next rubbed behind the baby's ears, and a cross made on forehead, mouth, and breast, to symbolise the consecration of each sense.

The priest then laid the purple stole from his own neck across the tiny form, as a sign of the yoke of Christ which must be borne; and while the assistant held back the cover of the font, poured water three times on the little

lolling head, which was afterwards wiped with appalling vigour, and finally powdered with a large puff.

After the baptism with water in the threefold Name the priest changed his stole to white, there was more anointing with the oil of chrism —on the top of the head this time, as a sign that the child has received the invisible unction of the Holy Ghost; then, while a lighted candle was held in the little hand as a symbol that the virtues of faith, hope, and charity must be openly professed and practised, a short homily was delivered, at the close of which the tiny new-made Christian, wholly unconscious of the mighty change wrought by these few minutes, was dismissed and bidden to "Go in peace!"

Yes, go in peace, little Nerina; for if there is scant welcome for you in the poor crowded home where there are already too many mouths to fill, there is no grudging in that great family of which you have now become a member; and if your worldly possessions are very small —your swathing bands, your glass rosary, and your elevenpence—you have yet received a gift greater than anything which the world has power either to give or take away.

VI

THE BEFANA

"WE three kings of Orient are"! How the words of the old carol appeal to us, calling up memories of some holly-decked church in an English country village; recreating, even in scenes entirely different, something of the spirit and atmosphere of Christmas seasons long gone past!

Of all the church festivals there is scarcely one which appeals more deeply to our imagination than the ancient feast of the Epiphany, which commemorates the homage paid by the kings and mighty ones of the earth to a little peasant Child enthroned upon His mother's knee.

The Gospel story tells us simply that "there came wise men from the east," following the star which heralded the birth of the King of the Jews. But about the mere fact time and art have woven a web of tradition and fable, quaint, grotesque, or beautiful; allegories, poems, plays, and pictures owe to it their being; and legend has handed down to us far more than the simple record of the Gospel tale.

These wise men were kings, we are told—perhaps because of that prophecy "Gentiles shall come to thy light and kings to the brightness of thy rising." The assumption that they were three is probably based on the number of the gifts they brought. Names were attributed to them—Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar; and one great Italian family still retains the quaint custom of adding to the baptismal names of each member that of one of these three kings.

Caspar, the legends say, was sixty years old and came from Arabia; Balthasar was forty, black-skinned, and had his home in Saba; Melchior, only twenty years old, came from Tarshish—so that, collectively, they represented the three ages of men doing homage to the Christ.

Tradition asserts that these wise men or "magians" were members of the sacred or priestly order of Persia, such magicians being widely scattered among Oriental nations, and including men of most exalted rank. However that may be, we at least know of these pilgrims that they came from far, and that they were wise; and it is safe to conclude, from the gifts they bore, that they were persons of wealth and distinction. Some say that as they prayed upon a mountain a little babe appeared to them

in light so brilliant that before it the stars faded; whereupon they were glad, and made haste on their dromedaries to cover the leagues which lay between them and the place where the "Desire of all nations," the young Child, was.

How the whole story appeals to the imagination! It is too improbable to have been invented, surely too beautiful to be untrue. One pictures the long journey from those mysterious Eastern lands with their romance and splendour; the days of travelling beneath the burning sun across the desert; the starlit nights when one star shone supreme; the arrival of the strangers in Jerusalem; the wonder of the people as the caravan passed through the streets; the audience with Herod, and then the following on, out of the city, towards the humble village, until at last, their search ended, the guiding star "stood still over the place where the young Child was," and, entering that humble place, they found Him, a peasant baby, upon His mother's knee. Was it a disappointment after all their toil and travel? No; for He who was to lighten the Gentiles had opened their eyes so that they were able to discern the hidden majesty, and, falling down, in sign of that religious reverence with which Eastern nations were accustomed to approach royalty, they offered gifts, appropriate to the region from

which they came, and to the person to whom they were offered—gifts symbolic of His threefold office, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

To this scene the Evangelist only adds that, being warned against Herod in a dream, they returned to their own country another way; but legend has more to tell us, and would have us believe that Mary Madonna gave them one of the swaddling bands of the Holy Child, which same they kept as a great treasure—and with reason, since, says the story, the linen, from contact with the small, sacred body, had received such virtue that when cast into the fire it was not burnt, Years later, tradition goes on to tell us, St. Thomas travelled to their country and baptized them, after which they went forth to preach the Gospel, and were slain for their faith in that Babe whom they had once worshipped incarnate; but the Empress Helena found their bones and brought them to Constantinople, from whence they were carried to Milan, and, later, by the Emperor Barbarossa, to Cologne, where, in the splendid chapel of the "Three Kings," they rest until this day.

Is it any wonder that such a subject as the journey and adoration of the Magi should have seized and held the imagination of painters in those days when men carved and painted that

which they loved and believed; and that one after another should have given us his conception of a scene in which all his powers of imagination, his delight in splendid costume, gorgeous colour, and fantastic ornament, might find their fullest scope?

The first artistic representations of the story are very simple. In them the number of the Magi varies from two to six. But as time passed detail was added to detail, legend after legend came to be accepted by the credulous, simple-minded people as fact, and symbolism to find a place in the artist's work. An open book was sometimes added, recalling the prophesy of Balaam that a star should come out of Jacob; a star was set above the child to recall the guiding light and to remind men that He was Himself the bright and morning star. The heads of camels suggested the journey from a far country, and at length the crowns, sign of royalty, appear about the year 534 in the grest mosaics of the Church of St. Apollonia at Ravenna.

Half of the Renaissance artists have given us their conception of the story. Fra Angelico painted the scene with touching simplicity upon the walls of one of the cells of the Convent of San Marco, and again in the room set apart for the use of Cosimo il Vecchio when he came

to the convent to consult with his friend, the saintly Antonino. Benozzo Gozzoli, a man who had "a great wonder and delight in all the creatures of God," depicted it by lamplight —since there was then no window—all round the walls of that tiny oratory in the Medici Palace which, for its wonderful preservation, its brilliant colouring, its imaginative charm, still remains one of the loveliest things in Florence.

There we see represented, as if actually before our eyes, the pomp and splendour of a court pageant in Medicean days. The procession is certainly more suggestive of a gay hunting party or of a scene in fairyland than of a devout pilgrimage. The bright figures, of whom the younger resemble fairy princes in their brocades and jewels, with their gilded armour and their *zazzere* of golden hair; the horses with their rich trappings, the slim, jaunty pages, wind their way through a landscape of stiff cypresses and stone-pines and fruit-trees, of belfries and villas and tiny towns, towards the pleasaunce of stiff rose-bushes and pines and pomegranates, where birds and angels sing together in honour of Mary Madonna and her little Child.

Botticelli also painted the coming of the Magi as a commission for Lorenzo the Magnificent, who, it is said, wished to present the

picture to the Church of Santa Maria Novella as a thank-offering for his escape from the Pazzi plot. Whether that be so or not, the picture is filled with portraits of the Medici, and represents *them*, in all their rich array, kneeling at the feet of the infant Christ, who lays one tiny hand upon the head of the old man bending before Him. The subject seems to have been a favourite one with that magnificent family, but there must surely have struck the artists who were called upon to paint it that there was something ironical in the choice, so great was the contrast between the pictures and the reality, in which latter there was little enough humility or submission;—had there been, the history of Florence would have been far other than what it was!

Gentile da Fabbriano likewise sets before us, charged with an indescribable spirit of romance, the gorgeous pageant of the kings, with their motley following of retainers, squires, jesters, negroes, and dwarfs, with the horses, apes, and leopards which had their place in a mediæval train.

Dürer painted the same story for Frederic the Wise, Elector of Saxony, and Ghirlandajo the "Garland Maker," and many another, down to Burne-Jones in the present day; and in every picture the lesson is the same, however little

taken to heart by those who gave the order for its execution—pride bowing down before humility; the physical and material brought into subjection to the spiritual; the glory and honour of the nations laid at the feet of Him for whom, when He came, though the greatest visitor of all, there was no room in the inn.

A festival so lovely as that of the Three Kings has never been allowed to fall entirely into disuse, and through all the centuries we find it observed in some way or other—often, it must be admitted, in anything but a devotional spirit; yet always with some details relating to its origin, something which, through all the buffoonery, recalled that long-past day.

For centuries there existed in Florence a custom of carrying about the city guys representing men and women, followed by crowds blowing upon long glass trumpets, shouting, whistling, and singing—making, in fact, all the noise in their power; and this uproar was supposed to commemorate the coming of the Three Kings to Bethlehem, for which reason the guys had frequently black faces, tradition asserting that one of them was black.

Indeed it was from this legend, and from a general confusion of ideas, that the belief arose in the "Befana," an ugly, black old woman who, for little Italians, plays the part of Santa

Claus and fills their socks with sweets and toys.

The noise on this noisiest of nights was, according to historians, always greatest in the Piazza San Firenze, where many, after the present façade had been added to the church, used to lead the most simple-minded and gullible folk they could find, with the promise of showing them the Epiphany trumpets; then, having escorted them thus far, they would point to the great stone trumpets in the mouths of the sculptured angels, at which laboured pleasantry the joy of the crowds knew no limits, and the excitement increased with each new victim who appeared upon the scene.

In many of the windows along the streets of the city were to be seen on this night illuminated guys, generally representing an ugly old woman or a figure of one of the Three Kings, and parties of revellers wandered about carrying such figures and followed by processions of street urchins with trumpets, drums, whistles, and everything which could produce the noise so dear to boyish hearts in every age. Everywhere there was singing, shouting, and rough horse-play; and, as too often happens when men are excited, and, in addition, drink, to use the Tuscan idiom, "like sponges," this horse-play not infrequently ended in a fight.

These fights had at times a fatal conclusion, as happened in 1589, when the Guild of Silk had prepared a magnificent guy, dressed in brocade and wearing many ornaments, and were carrying it in procession with much pomp and circumstance along the streets.

As the procession passed through the Via Condotta it was met by the carriage of the Marchese Sampieri of Bologna, which was coming up, and owing to the narrowness of the way, both parties came necessarily to a halt. The revellers told the Marchese's coachman, Antonio Mondini, to take a side street and leave place for the passing of the procession. He refused to do so, and an altercation ensued, in which the Marquis, from the carriage window, supported his own servant and ordered him to drive on. Feeling ran high, and Mondini, who with difficulty held in his powerful horses, which were excited by the noise, the flaring torches, and the movement around them, shouted to the people to make way. On their refusing to do so he drew a pistol and fired into the foremost group, mortally wounding Signor Domenico Ricci, who was, as ill-luck would have it, the only son of a noble family, and who, being carried into a shop hard by, "in less than an hour rendered up his soul to his Creator."

Another disastrous Befana was that of 1594 —five years later—when two parties with their rival guys met upon the Ponte alle Grazie, and each refusing to give way and let the other pass, a fight began, first with the guys mounted upon their wooden poles and then with stones, the result being that Pietro del Moro, being wounded in the head, died on the following day at the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, leaving a widow and three children, he having been married less than four years!

After these two ill-fated festivals the people took warning and, with the instinct of closing the door after the steed was stolen, contented themselves for the future with more peaceful means of celebrating the fête.

As for the figures set in the windows of the houses, Fagiuoli, who wrote in 1724, describes one which was the wonder of all beholders, having in the neck a string to which was attached a cord hidden by the clothes, which, being pulled, caused the Befana to make "a gracious salute with the head to whoever turned towards her from the street to look at her"; but the bitterness with which the writer goes on to observe that it would be well if some of *nostre Pasquelle incivili* could be treated in the same manner, leads us to imagine that poor Fagiuoli had been piqued by some cold-

ness or disdain on the part of the lady of his heart!

In the street pageants there was always, in later times, one car higher and more splendid than the rest, on the top of which was enthroned a man dressed as Jove, in velvet robes embroidered with gold; but one unlucky year, in crossing the Ponte alle Grazie, Jove, who was represented that year by a fireman named Cristofani, was almost blown from his lofty perch into the river, and after that refused to play again so majestic a part. He still, however, acted Jove upon a lower car, until in 1838 the procession took place in such a deluge of rain that the unhappy god developed a *mal di petto*, owing to which, in three days' time, he took his journey to the other world! As after that year no volunteer for the part came forward, the solemn Epiphany pageant was abolished, and only the figures in the windows and the smaller processions survived, together with the custom of attending the solemn vespers sung in all the churches on the vigil, and carrying to these services flasks and bottles in which to bring away the holy water which was blessed and distributed to the people by the priests.

The influence of the Befana then passed almost entirely into domestic circles, where mothers warned their naughty children with

threats that this mythical old woman would fetch and eat them, while the reward promised to the virtuous was that she should bring them toys and sweets.

In this beneficent power Bianca Maria believes profoundly, and her conduct becomes quite angelic as the sixth of January approaches, so fearful is she of finding in her stocking the birch and coals destined for naughty children instead of the playthings and bonbons which her soul desires. For weeks beforehand she can talk of nothing else, her thoughts running as much in a groove as a tram along its lines; and although seven years old, she has not yet lost any of her illusions, and does not for a moment attribute to human agency the blessings in the shape of dolls and picture-books which are showered upon her at this date.

All children love gifts and "goodies" in whatever age they live, and I find the prototype of Bianca Maria's unblushingly expressed desires as to what the Befana should bring her in five-year-old Piero dei Medici's letter written more than four centuries ago to his grandmother, Lucrezia Tornabuoni: "Send us some more figs; I mean those very ripe ones; and send us some peaches with their kernels and other of those things which you know we like —sweetmeats and tarts and some such little

things." A little later, in Latin, he begs his father for a "small horse," explaining that, "To give a tone to my letters I have always written them in Latin, and yet I have not had the little horse you promised me, so that everybody laughs at me"; and again—"I am afraid that something must have happened to that horse, because if it had been all right you would have sent it to me. If that one cannot come, please send me another."

Bianca Maria's wishes were proclaimed quite as openly from the housetops; her conduct, like little Piero's, was as exemplary as could be expected of a seven-year-old; and if her zeal showed itself in laborious lines of English copy instead of in Latin letters, it was rewarded with at least as much success.

It was because the Befana had brought to Bianca Maria a more than usually generous supply of this world's goods that it was proposed that she should herself "play Befana," by carrying some of her older possessions to Cleolia, her foster-sister, being educated in a convent school not far away.

Accordingly, through the frosty brightness of the January morning, we set off, she and I together, laden with toys and picture-books and a large bag full of oranges and nuts.

The convent lay outside the town, a steep

road leading to it between stone walls fringed with olive-trees, the tracery of their silver leaves delicate as lace against the clear blue sky.

When at last we arrived before the white archway, with its closely barred gates which shut in the *Monache* from the outer world, there was some delay while one of the nuns examined us through a peephole, and, having found us to be innocent-looking people of the harmless sex, opened the door and let us pass inside.

Through a courtyard and by a chilly passage we passed, being finally ushered into the visitors' room, and there left to wait while the nun went in search of the Mother Superior, whose leave had to be obtained before Cleolia might be called.

The visitors' room in a convent is seldom an exhilarating place in which to wait, and this one was no exception to the rule. A square table stood in the middle, and a row of horsehair chairs against the sides. In one corner was the grating through which the nuns might talk to the relations who were occasionally allowed to visit them. On the walls hung a picture of the Pope, several photographs of dead people, and a number of coloured prints of death-bed scenes. In these latter the departure of the righteous was depicted by an

angel bearing up to heaven the soul in the form of a smiling child—this representation being found in very ancient paintings of the Crucifixion, in which the death of the penitent thief is thus shown—while below the friends and priest knelt around the figure which, with beatific expression and folded hands, lay upon the bed; but the death of the wicked was enough to give Bianca Maria nightmare for a week, so redolent of fire and brimstone was it, so violent were the ravings of the dying man, so terrible the devils waiting round the bed.

At last, under the guardianship of the Mother Superior, arrived Cleolia, with her hair so tightly braided back in its little tail that the skin was stretched quite tight upon her forehead; around her neck was a clean and prickly tucker, pinned on for the occasion, and she stood before us the embodiment of shyness, and recently and vigorously applied soap.

The little girls stood staring silently at each other, after the manner of children in the presence of their elders, while the Mother Superior gave a report of Cleolia's conduct, which she described — poor seven-year-old! — as sadly lacking in *giudizio;* however, she added, it was proposed that she should have the *Cresima* (Confirmation) at Whitsuntide, and it was hoped that that would have a sobering effect.

Poor little Cleolia! she stood looking very awkward and shamefaced during the recital of her follies, but she brightened up wonderfully at the sight of the presents, and had evidently visions of playing Befana in her turn for the other children with the aid of her oranges and nuts.

The Mother Superior asked presently, with some diffidence, if we would honour the Convent by visiting the *Presepio*, which had been arranged for Christmas, and was still left in its place for the Feast of the Three Kings. She admitted deprecatingly as she led us along the corridor and into a large bare room, that it was a *cosa di niente*, but none the less there was no little pride in the air with which she led us up to it, having first closed the shutters to keep out the too pitiless light of day.

The *Presepio* was arranged upon a table, bunches of evergreens representing forests, and pudding-bowls of water, pools. In the foreground stood a majestic woman puppet with a stony expression of countenance—what part she played in the sacred drama I have not the least idea. Near her grazed a small cow, while a fur-covered rabbit of dimensions almost equal to the people, who had, I believe, begun life as a bonbon box before he "found religion," sat bolt upright close at hand. One stolid-faced

king, who may have been either Casper, Melchior, or Balthasar, advanced on horseback down a wooded pathway, the remaining two, for lack of representatives, being supposed to have not yet emerged from the forest glades. A group of plaster shepherds, surrounded by their flocks, awoke with various gestures of surprise at the summons of a waxen angel dressed in faded gauze. In a corner, under a large tinsel star and a shelter of green boughs, very pink and flaxen-haired, upon a bed of straws accurately and symmetrically arranged like a halo, lay the *Gesulino*, watched over by Mary Madonna and Joseph, and regarded with stolid interest by a wooden ox and ass.

It was a hideous, grotesque thing, having, to an unsympathetic observer, no redeeming feature; and yet the scene, even in this form and under symbols so clumsy, meant so much, so very much. After all, the stiff, stern-faced dolls were not uglier, more grotesque in their way than many an early Christian painting; they had been set there by loving hearts; they were the object of most touching devotion; for, as the Mother Superior told me in low tones when the shutters had been closed and tiny fragments of candle—very tiny, for the nuns are poor — illuminated the scene like yellow stars in the darkness, they, as

well as the children, came there to say their prayers!

Well, so they might, since children, by the blessed magic of their imagination, can discern in the meanest symbol, the most uncompromising material object, all kinds of beauties unperceived by duller eyes; and what are the good sisters, in their sheltered convent, but children of a larger growth?

Bianca Maria was obviously impressed by the scene before her, the beauties of which I heard Cleolia pointing out and describing in what was intended for a reverent whisper; there was a tender light in the eyes of the Mother Superior as she looked at the poor little "tableau"; even as we stood there a nun glided in, and, crossing herself, knelt to pray before the *Gesulino*, who extended his rounded waxen arms. A childish superstition some, I know, would call it; others would denounce it by the harsher name of idolatry; but after all it was but a survival of the ancient miracle plays; in what was its spirit different from the Passion Plays which draw thousands to Oberammergau, or from the crucifixes before which prayers are whispered in the churches, or the painted windows in which, for our encouragement, are set before us the triumphs of the saints? All these things are but symbols, speaking through

the eyes to the heart; and as the Magi discerned the Godhead beneath the form of a humble peasant Baby, so these nuns and children, kneeling before their grotesque little theatre, found themselves brought nearer to the unseen and spiritual—perhaps because, as a guiding star led those travellers long, long ago from distant countries, so, for them, the star of a simple faith came and stood still over the place where the young Child was.

VII

LUCIA

LUCIA is not a picturesque figure; she is, in fact, of an incredible plainness, and afflicted with a large proportion of the ills to which our flesh is heir. She is, to put it quite bluntly, a crippled dwarf, a tiny creature whose whole body is twisted on one side, whose hands are deformed, whose face is ugly, and who has, in addition to all these trials, lost a leg.

Certainly, judged superficially, she is at the best uninteresting, at the worst grotesque; but one's estimate changes with closer knowledge, for in this frail and crooked body there dwells a very brave and steadfast soul.

Poor Lucia! her history, as she told it to me, with never a word of complaint or resentment, is a pathetic one; yet she seems to feel no bitterness over an unkind fate which has given her not only poverty and hard work, but deprived her of everything which makes life sweet to other girls—for what single one of the joys of girlhood and womanhood are within the reach of a deformed dwarf who has only one leg and is not without fear of losing the other;

and who has, moreover, a thin, ugly little face, protruding teeth, one shoulder higher than the other, and misshapen hands? Any but an exceptionally sweet nature would be tormented by a passion of jealousy against those who are straight and strong and possessed of all the gifts which the gods have denied her, but Lucia acquiesces quite cheerily, and seems to have no room for envy or resentment in her heart.

Most of her time as a little child and young girl was spent in the hospital, being treated for the cruel abscesses which, continually forming in her leg, sapped her feeble strength. But one ray of happiness seems to have brightened this dreary youth, and that was the kindness of a *Signorina americana*, with blue eyes and yellow hair, who used to visit at the hospital, and who taught her to read and knit and sew. Reading and sewing lessons!—they do not seem such very rosy recollections to carry as one's best out of the years of childhood; but probably it was less the practical teaching than the sympathy which awoke such gratitude in the starved and lonely little heart.

The doctor wished to amputate the leg, since there would be the end of most of the trouble; but Lucia's mother, a nervous, tearful woman, would not hear of an action so decisive. She

possessed all the prejudice of her class against hospitals and surgeons, and thought it less barbarous that her daughter should die by inches during long years of continual suffering than enter into life maimed, it is true, but with the prospect of reasonably good health. So Lucia had to go on bearing her pain for a long time —would have certainly died for want of the necessary operation, if just then her mother had not died instead; and so it happened that Lucia lost her limb and saved her life.

All that happened years ago. Lucia is now about thirty; and, though more than once the other leg has given anxiety, is as a rule fairly strong, and able to get about upon her crutches at a surprising rate.

Lucia lives with a married sister, who does not, I fear, make her very happy or for a moment disguise the fact that she considers her presence a burden. Why it should be so, however, I cannot imagine, for I am sure the help she gives in domestic affairs must more than outvalue the food she eats; and, in addition, there are the wages she brings in from outside. But Fortunata is not one of those who realise that charity is less a matter of bread than of the kindness with which that bread is given; and the little cripple, however bright a face she tries to put upon it, must often be made to

feel, with the great poet, how salt is the bread of others and how steep their stairs.

Lucia's home is in a tall old house in one of the *chiassi* of Florence, situated in a poor district in the Oltr' Arno, a *chiasso*—about the equivalent of an English "alley"—meaning a narrow lane.

Certainly Lucia's *chiasso* is an extremely dark and narrow one, into which even the Italian sun can seldom penetrate. The ancient, gloomy-looking houses rise like cliffs on either side of it: from window to window hang coloured rags fresh from the washtub, and looking little the better for their sojourn there: on the doorsteps and at the entrances to the great vaulted halls, so splendid in past days, now so squalid, sit slatternly women, nursing their children or eating strange, unappetising-looking food. To an artist's eye it is all picturesque enough, no doubt, but as a dwelling-place it has few attractions to offer, and Lucia's home, up a yet narrower court opening out of the *chiasso* has, to the casual observer, even less. But this inner court, gloomy as it is, possesses at least two advantages: one is that, being more secluded, it is a little quieter, less often disturbed by loud and angry voices; the other, that one side of it is formed by the high wall of a great palace garden—one of those old gardens which

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still exist within the walls of the city—and that not only is it a never-failing joy to Lucia to look at the wall and picture the flowers which, if out of sight, are still very near her, but at times a breath of fragrance steals over the wall into the alley; and it has even happened sometimes in early summer that a spray of Banksia rose or a branch of waxen fire-red pomegranate has leaned over into Lucia's court, making sunshine in a shady place, a little spot of colour in the dull and unlovely setting of her life.

It is not easy for visitors to find Lucia at home, so many and varied are her engagements, so many the works which she undertakes to enable her to earn the few sous which buy her the bare necessities of life. But she is seldom very far off, and the despatch of one of the dirty ragged children playing in the gutter usually brings her without much delay. One day it is from the priest's house that she comes limping, having begged a few minutes leave from her cleaning that she may see her "Signorina," whose visits are, I verily believe, the brightest rays of sunshine in her life; another day she arrives, her hands pink and wrinkled, from some one's washtub, or fresh from the minding of children or the mending of clothes. But in some way or other she is always busy, and when not out at some neighbour's she is

Photo G. R. Ballance.

LUCIA'S CHIASSO.

hard at work at home, cleaning, cooking, nursing babies, sewing, straw-plaiting, or mending and darning for the soldiers of the barracks close at hand.

Even while she talks to me her crooked little fingers are busy with her straw-plaiting, the apparently confused number of straws or strands of fibre being reduced with incredible swiftness to an ordered braid. Certainly she earns little enough by her straw-plaiting; the most skilful worker can hardly make more than three halfpence or twopence a day by close application —unless she succeed in inventing some new pattern, in which case she may gain a little more; but, as Lucia says cheerfully, "Every little helps, Signorina, and it is only by taking the work which comes that one keeps the pot boiling; he who sleeps catches no fish," she ends up, laughing, with one of those Tuscan proverbs which are always on the lips of the people, "and necessity makes even the old mare trot!"

Lucia has a quaint and abrupt little manner, entirely independent and without any frills of graciousness; indeed, for a Tuscan, she is unusually lacking in grace and courtesy, but her brusqueness is quite unintentional, and if her words are few, her actions speak loudly of her gratitude for every benefit received.

Certainly the kindnesses which I have been able to do for her have not been many: the gift of an old dress now and again, an occasional visit, a picture-card from time to time when on a journey—these seem very small services to stir such grateful feelings; yet when I gave her a commission for some knitting—a work of some length, which I had designed as a means of enabling her to earn something—she flatly and steadily refused any payment; her one reply, from which no arguments could move her, being, that I had done so much for her!

When not long afterwards I went to pay my Christmas visit to Lucia I found her in a state of suppressed excitement, which I found it hard to account for; and having accepted—in that offhand manner which at times veils so much feeling—the jacket I had brought her, she mentioned, in a would-be casual tone, that she had got a gift for me.

Of course I was all eagerness and curiosity to learn the secret, and after a brief withdrawal to the next room, Lucia reappeared with an enormous parcel in her arms, carefully swathed in many sheets of tissue-paper, which she laid with much circumspection upon my knee.

"*E una cosa di niente*" (A mere trifle), she observed with assumed carelessness, as I unfolded the wrappings, but her face belied her words,

and when the present stood revealed to me in its full splendour, I felt bound to admit that, judged from Lucia's artistic standpoint, it was a very legitimate cause for pride.

It proved to be a basket of fancy straw, woven in an intricate pattern and filled with moss, from which protruded, like hatpins from a cushion, straw flowers of all colours—roses, carnations, and dahlias, each one proudly erect upon a wire, paper-covered stalk.

There was no doubt that it was a "creation" in every sense of the word, and combined wonderful ingenuity of brain with skilfulness of hand. Had she made it herself? I asked, after many expressions of admiration and all due acknowledgments of the gift. But Lucia shook her head. She was not clever enough for such fine work, she explained; her fingers were too clumsy. It had been made by a friend of hers who worked in a hat and basket factory, and who was *molto brava e pratica.* This skilful Clementina had executed the commission at nights when her working hours were over; Lucia—already, I am sure, overburdened with duties—paying her by sewing, mending, and such-like work in her scanty leisure, being unable, owing to her poverty, to make any payment in coin of the realm.

Certainly the gifts of the poor are infinitely

touching—prompted, as they are, not by convention, but by gratitude and affection, and procured only at the price of personal sacrifice. Rich people's gifts are too often a mere travesty of the word, a conventional exchange founded upon reciprocity and more honoured in the breach than the observance, when one considers the grumbling which frequently precedes their purchase, the questions of not "Will this give pleasure?" but "Will it look as good as the one I have received?": when one remembers the utter indifference in so many cases of the recipient of such presents who, having counted the cost of the article and found it wanting, having condemned it as useless, mean, or inartistic, tosses it impatiently aside or puts it away as a bazaar contribution or a birthday gift for the coming year.

But there was nothing of all this about Lucia's gift. It was bought by much labour; its form was prompted by an earnest desire to choose an object both beautiful and befitting a *signorina distintissima*, which is what, setting aside my natural modesty, I believe Lucia considers me to be. And what, from her point of view, could fulfil more perfectly this twofold purpose than the article selected —a centre-piece for the table when my friends should visit me; an interesting—and I should

imagine unique! — specimen of the straw-plaiter's handicraft; an ornament not unworthy to be kept under a glass case (Lucia's leaping imagination cannot soar beyond this honour!) even in the *salotti* of the great.

When my visit drew to a close some sense of the inconvenience of carrying so large and frail a parcel about the city (I was not returning home for some hours) prompted me to hint that, for fear of damaging the precious basket in the transit, I would send a servant for it later in the day. Lucia's face, however, fell pitifully; in a moment all the brightness was swept away as the writing from a slate; her disappointment was so unfeigned and poignant that I would have carried it if it had been the size of a washing-basket sooner than let her think that any slight was cast upon her gift!

Only one event varies, as a rule, the monotony of Lucia's year—that is, her *villeggiatura*. Even this, though dignified by so grand a title, is only a change and not a holiday, as, spending three or four weeks in the busy harvest season with a family of peasants, she pays for her board and lodging by her help. This summer month in the country is the supreme joy of Lucia's life; it is that to which she looks forward all the year.

It is well for all of us to have a palace of

dreams into which we can at times enter when the burden of the commonplace, the tedious round of daily duties, becomes too heavy. Our palaces vary infinitely in size and form according to the infinite variety of our ambitions, hopes, and temperaments. Some of us dream of worldly success and honour, and pile cloud cities to the skies; some shape for themselves a home where love shall be the impregnable wall which shuts out all the winds of the outer world; some surround themselves with great, if as yet immaterial, possessions; others wander, free burgesses, in the palace of nature, creating, by imagination, shady bowers even in the city streets; others retire into the great world of fiction, where they find a thousand lovable and winsome friends, or relive the tremendous scenes of history; some, saddest of all, hoping for no future, live only in the misty world of their past happiness; and others —the saints of the earth—reckon as nothing all earthly trials and disappointments, joyful through the hope of the glory some day to be revealed.

Lucia's palace, compared with all these, is a very humble one—a mere cottage in fact, but none the less her solace through many hard and tedious days. To one accustomed to live in leisure or luxury it might be hard to per-

ceive the ecstatic joy of a month in a bare peasant-house, sharing a hard bed, eating dry bread and polenda, and passing the days in mending clothes, nursing children, and gleaning in the fields; but it is difficult for even the most sympathetic to put himself entirely in the place of another, and for Lucia it is a period of unalloyed delight.

She exchanges the nagging, fretful society of her sister for the company of the peasants who, if rough in their ways, are at least kind to her: she exchanges her narrow street and dark home for the beauty of the Tuscan hillside, the golden harvest fields, the quiet house among the olives, the splendour of the long blue days and starlit nights beneath the open sky: and she comes back to town again a little stronger, a little braver, to face the trials of her life, bringing with her a supply of wild lavender gathered on the hills among the myrtle and cistus, to keep her happy memories fresh by its perfume until summer shall again come round.

Knowing the conditions upon which Lucia's *villeggiatura* was usually accomplished, and how successfully this arrangement had worked for several seasons, I was naturally much surprised on visiting her, a few days before myself leaving for the summer, to learn, after some questioning, that she did not intend going out of

town this year. She admitted that the heat was trying her sorely, that she felt as limp as *calza disfatta*—surely an expressive simile, as what could be more pliable, more wanting in backbone, than an unravelled stocking?—but no, circumstances had made it impossible for her to go into the country; she would get along very well in town.

This decision troubled me. I felt that there must be something more in it than appeared on the surface, and, off myself to the mountains, I could not bear to think of Lucia, who stood in far greater need of a change than I did, passing the sultry days in the city; so I tried what I could do to clear up the mystery and find out if there was any difficulty in the way.

"Do you not think it would do you good to go?" I asked, feeling my way cautiously.

"*Ma sicuro! un bene del altro mondo.*"

"Well, were you not comfortable with the peasants last year?" I pursued, casting about in my mind for possible reasons.

"*Ah, si, Signorina,*" responded Lucia, her face brightening at the recollection; "one finds oneself there like a pope!"

"Are the people not able to take you in this year?" for that seemed a possible explanation.

"*Eh, altro,*" Lucia replied without hesitation; "it displeases them much that I go not; it is now four years that I have not missed."

"Has your sister made any difficulty about your going?"

"*Che, che!* to her it makes nothing if I go or stay."

"Then is it," I inquired with a sudden flash of inspiration, "any question of money? Have you not enough to pay them for your board?"

Lucia shook her head more vehemently than ever. "I pay them not," she replied, "in any case. I work for them all day—they have need of another woman in harvest-time—and they feed me in return. Yes, even milk and eggs at times—*ah, che squizitezza!*" and she sighed as she took up the straw plait which she had momentarily laid aside.

I was at my wits' end. Question as I would I could find no clue to the mystery, until at last, with a flash of conviction, I cried, "It is the money for the journey, Lucia! Why did you not tell me so before?"

Lucia looked embarrassed.

"Why should I tell that which would not interest the Signorina? It is a thing of no importance. This year I go not in the country, that is all; and I find myself very well here.

It is a thing of nothing!" but her white face belied her words.

"I know why you would not tell me, Lucia," I said severely; "it was because you knew I should give you the money, and you were too proud to let me do so. I am quite hurt at your treating me like that; I thought you considered me your friend."

Lucia shifted uneasily from one side to the other.

"Too proud, no; but it is not right that the Signorina should be always giving, giving; already she has done far too much. No, this year I go not; I have decided myself to rest in the city, and it makes nothing. If I had the money it would be another pair of sleeves (the Tuscan equivalent for a horse of another colour), or even if the Signorina had done less for me in the days that are past; another year, if God wishes, I go, but not this."

"Tell me how much it costs to go and return in the railway? I will give it to you gladly," I persisted; "it cannot cost much to go such a little way."

"Ah, one wants much money," Lucia admitted with a sigh. "I would not by any means that the Signorina should deprive herself of a sum so large."

"*How* much?" I repeated firmly, deter-

mined to have an answer; and at last Lucia, fairly cornered, cast down her eyes, reddened with embarrassment at the magnitude of the amount, and murmured under her breath, "Five francs"!

Five francs? Good heavens! to think that the lack of so small a sum—just fifty English pennies—should debar Lucia, crippled, overworked, half-starved, of her yearly treat! The very idea seemed a reproach to me and to the class to which, however impecunious, I belong. I was ashamed when I recalled the daily accounts in the papers of the gay doings at mountain resorts and seaside places; ashamed to remember the amounts which the rich squandered upon luxuries and pleasures, while this cripple—herself only the representative, alas! of an unnumbered multitude—was resigning herself without complaint to the foregoal of her one pleasure, to the fading of the dream which had been her solace all the year.

Having once admitted the fact which delicacy had led her to hide so carefully, Lucia became more communicative on the subject, explaining that this time, as in previous years, she had saved up the money week by week, here a centesimo and there a soldo, until she had the whole amount ready in the old stocking-foot which she carried for safety inside her

dress. But then Nello, the baby, had been taken ill, and, the fever over, there had been need in the following weakness for eggs and milk and broth—costly delicacies for the poor to come by—if the *angiolino* were not to die before their eyes. So out came the precious stocking, and Lucia's *villeggiatura*, from a golden vision which cheered her during long hours at the washtub or at her sewing, faded into the shadowy region of the unattainable, and her lovely hopes materialised under the prosaic form of broth and eggs.

It evidently did not occur to her for a moment that there had been anything noble or self-sacrificing in her conduct. It was to her "a thing very natural"; any one in her place would have done the same! But her joy knew no bounds when she realised that after all she was to go into the country. The hope which had for so long been crushed rose stronger than ever, and she confided to me in an ecstasy of delight that the week which must elapse before her *vartenza* would seem, such was her impatience, longer than a day without bread!

I saw Lucia off at the station myself ten days later; and I am sure that of all the holiday-makers in the long train none had a gladder heart or brighter anticipations than the little lame dwarf in the corner of her third-class car-

riage, setting out on this tremendous journey —forty minutes at the very least!—to the country she had desired to see so ardently, so unselfishly resigned.

Ah well, there are many Lucias in this world, hiding beautiful souls beneath ugly exteriors and leading unselfish and noble lives in quiet and sunless corners of the earth. But if, as I believe, the duty of man to man is to bring more beauty into the world, whether it be the beauty of song or painting or architecture, or the beauty of love and self-sacrifice and sweet, unselfish help, Lucia, by her patient, unresenting acceptance of hard conditions, her cheerful activity, her self-forgetting admiration of those more fortunate than she is, will not have lived in vain, even if this life were all—but it is not. Indeed the very fact of such a spirit in such a body, and amid such circumstances, seems to me a pledge, if further pledge were needed, of a glorious future when the crooked shall be made straight and all rough places plain. For in Lucia's case her frail, twisted body suggests to me the ugly brown bulb, without form or comeliness, which we plant in the autumn; the difficulties and sufferings which beset her as the dark earth through which it struggles up; but sooner or later, as the green leaves and perfect blossoms of a hyacinth expand in the

sunshine and fill the air with fragrance, so there will come a sure day when the brave and beautiful spirit, obscured no longer, will rise from the crippled body which is its envelope, and, growing above the encumbering earth of pain and poverty, will expand into the perfect flower, and stand, not only lovable, but lovely, in the fadeless light of God.

VIII

AMONG THE TUSCAN IRISES

It was the end of May. Florence, the Flower City, truly deserved her name in those days, for everywhere the white and yellow roses hung in long festoons over the walls and twined themselves about the cypresses. The wistaria lay in masses of pale purple upon the house-fronts; the streets were scented with the fragrance of the many-coloured blooms in the flower-vender's baskets, and spring and summer alike seemed to have bestowed their sweetness upon this perfect month. Merely to be alive was, under the circumstances, a pleasure; and so Bianca Maria and I felt it to be as we drove out through the city gates and up into the hills.

In the fields along the way the pale, shimmering gold of the ripening gold rippled like a sunset sea around the olives; the acacias were loaded with clusters of frail white blossoms; from time to time there floated across to us from some thicket, where the trees and myrtle bushes were outlined as clearly against the broad green spaces of evening sky, as in Botti-

celli's *Primavera*, the cry of a cuckoo, whereupon Bianca Maria broke out into answering song:—

> " En passant dans un petit bois,
> Où le coucou chantait,
> Dans sa jolie voix il disait
> Coucou, coucou ! coucou, coucou ! "

Only her childish treble and the rythmic tread of the horses' hoofs breaking the quiet of the windless air.

Passive acquiescence in the Tuscan spring is surely impossible for any one less phlegmatic than a tortoise! Indeed even a tortoise, for all I know, feels some quickening of the pulses when the "sweet o' the year" again comes round. The air is too full of the rapturous joy of renewed life; beauty is bestowed too lavishly for passive acceptance: there is something intoxicating in such loveliness. Through all the wintry months when the icy winds sweep over the mountains, one hungers for it; and I for one am ready to fall on my knees and thank Heaven before the first snowdrop, frail harbinger of a conquering army, which unfolds its pure white bell.

No wonder then if Bianca Maria and I rejoiced exceedingly that it was May, and that we were alive to enjoy it; if we were as ready

to *festeggiare* as any of those companies of old-time Florentines who, crowned with flowers, went singing through the streets to welcome in the spring.

The Villa was a long way from the town. It was already dusk when we arrived there, and of the surroundings but few impressions could be formed. Yet any country district in the neighbourhood of Florence must be delectable in the Maytime, and as I looked from my window into the mysterious dark of the moonless night where the first few fire-flies of the season were flitting, and listened to the song of the nightingales in the depths of the ilex grove, it was with the joyous certainty that the morrow held some lovely gift in store.

Nor was I disappointed. Early the next morning I was up and out in the garden, and never shall I forget the glad surprise of the scene which lay before my eyes.

The Villa stood upon a hill. Behind, across a valley, the hills rose again, high and very steep, to form a near horizon. In front, from a long balcony, the land fell away in quiet slopes towards Florence, affording a view which seemed well-nigh limitless, so strong was the sense of breadth and space, so far off and ethereal was the line with which the Carrara mountains met the sky.

Although I had spent several springs in the neighbourhood of Florence, this was my first upon that side of the country, and I was therefore unaware that it was the district where most of the irises for the famous Florentine orris root was grown. Had I known this, I should have been prepared and expectant; as it was I stood breathless, silent, before so wonderful a sight.

The irises were all in flower. Up the long slopes and in the rounded hollows of the hills they stood in millions, close-growing; a carpet of pale purple; an amethystine sea from which the olive-trees raised their silver foliage and twisted, moss-grown trunks. Erect upon its tall stalk each flower stood majestic, springing proudly from its sword-like leaves.

They broke in purple waves against the very walls of the little white farmhouses, and, as the breeze passed over them, it stirred their surface as the wind might ruffle the surface of a lake. They crept into the copses among the young oak-trees. The clusters of stone pines on their straight, slender stems, the groups of cypresses like sombre plumes, the thickets of bay and myrtle breaking the even flow of them, were but as rocks against which the water lapped. Even the patches of corn, usually supreme in a landscape, seemed as a mere em-

broidery upon this royal robe of purple, or as "the Islands of the Blessed" set in an enchanted sea.

It was a fit hour for such a vision, for all this loveliness lay outstretched beneath a pale blue sky, in the clear quiet air of early morning. This mystical world of lilac and pale silver, beautiful at any time, possessed a more indescribable charm, a more ethereal and appealing loveliness, in the austere light of the unsullied day.

All my life I have loved the scent of orris root. Many a time have I bought it down in the ancient *farmacia* of Santa Maria Novella, where, though the picturesque Dominicans no longer, as in former days, distil and sell the perfumes, the old industry is still carried on. But I, like many another, had never traced the connection between final effects and fundamental causes, never speculated as to where the orris root came from, nor under what circumstances and in what surroundings it was grown; never pictured the fairness preceding the fragrance, nor imagined a scene so lovely as that of this shimmering veil of silver olives above the purple fields.

Florence is famous for its orris root perfumes. Indeed it is fitting that, as the *giglio* is the city's heraldic emblem everywhere blaz-

oned, the essence of the *giglio* should be the city's characteristic scent. But although I had seen the lines of iris bordering the banks and watercourses in many a *podere*, or fringing the walls along the country roads; had gathered them, gold and purple, in the olive gardens or beside little rippling streams, these had been but scattered companies. Here they held full sway; dominated the landscape; ruled by the power of numbers and of perfect loveliness.

It was very still at that early hour. The silvery peal of the Ave Maria of dawn floated down from little churches high upon the hills. The only human being in sight was the postman, who passed along the path beneath the terrace on his way to the distant village to fetch the letter-bags. In his shabby uniform he was a prosaic figure in such surroundings, but he greeted me civilly enough, observing, though without enthusiasm, that the weather promised well.

There is nothing of the Mercury, the winged messenger of the gods, about our postman. I am sure that the poetical side of his high office has never struck him for a moment. He does not realise that he is the harbinger of joy and sorrow, the bearer of those news from far countries which a wise man has said are as

water in a thirsty land. He does not stop to think that hearts beat the faster for his coming, that he is the link between those severed by half the world, and that, in some humble way, he has his share in that benediction, "beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those that bring good news of peace." He is a prosaic and entirely unromantic individual of forty, who tramps the country under an enormous green umbrella, loaded with letter-bags and all kinds of miscellaneous goods. For he is parcel as well as letter carrier, and often appears hung around with packages, bags, and baskets like a veritable Father Christmas. I cannot say that he manifests any burning zeal in the discharge of his high mission, having a provoking habit, if the letters do not seem sufficient in number to justify his making the long circuit to pass by the Villa, of committing them to chance peasants or school children who may be going that way. Of course such conduct is most reprehensible, and any complaint at headquarters would doubtless bring Giovanni into serious trouble. But who would have the heart to make it? Certainly not I, as I sit in a cool, darkened room while the outer world is hushed, save for the ceaseless whirr of the *cicale*, before the golden pomp of noonday, and think of Giovanni, like a large

green mushroom, trudging along the unsheltered roads beneath the blazing sun.

By-and-by I wearied of being a mere spectator from the terrace. I wanted to be among the irises, to feel them on every side of me; to put out, as it were, from shore into that purple sea; so I left the garden by a side gate, following the invitation of the white road towards the higher slopes.

Presently, as I wandered up the hill, I heard a clear voice singing:—

> "Volesse Iddio che fossi un rondino,
> Avessi l' ale e potessi volare,
> Vorrei volar sull' uscio del mulino
> Dove sta lo mio amore a macinare:
> E gli vorrei volare intorno,
> E ci vorrei restar la notte e il giorno,"

and came upon a young girl busy gathering sheaves of irises, while she alternately sang her *stornelli* and took bites at a large hunch of coarse dark bread.

She was a charming little figure in her faded green skirt and blue bodice; her apron was red, and she wore a red and yellow scarf knotted around her neck. Her black curling hair was uncovered, and she looked at me with dusky brown eyes like those of some woodland creature. So picturesque was she that I could not make up my mind to go farther, and sitting

Photo. G. F. Ballance.

THE WHITE ROAD TOWARDS THE UPPER SLOPES.

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down upon the step of a half-ruined shrine which bore the legend—

"Gesù; Giuseppe, Maria,
Siete sempre in mia compagnia,"

I soon found her willing enough to talk.

She was gathering flowers to sell in the town, she told me. Tonino, her brother, went down every day to take them, and she was up at dawn to pick them, so that they might still be fresh when they reached the shops.

Was it not hard to get up so early? I questioned; but she shook her head with a little laugh. "We peasants go to bed early and rise early, Signorina," she answered; "and" (quoting one of the Tuscan proverbs) "the morning has gold in its mouth."

Later on, she explained, when the irises had all flowered, would be the time for getting up and peeling the roots, and that was a long business; but if the Signorina was still at the Villa, then she would see for herself when and how the work was done.

Never having had any experience of this charming industry I was fired with interest at the prospect, and as a kind fate ordained that I should be at the Villa again in August, I was able to see the whole process for myself.

The growing of irises in a good year is a profitable business; but when prices are low it

is sometimes hardly worth the labour of getting them up and preparing them for the market, so small are the returns.

As a rule the digging up begins in July, when all the flowers have had plenty of time to dry off. From the principal root of each plant some small suckers are cut off and planted in fresh ground, so as to yield a future crop. As the young plants will not produce good roots until the second year at the earliest, it is of course necessary to have alternate pieces of land in which to take up the plants of one season and set those for two or three years ahead.

The orris root industry is, like all agricultural industries in Tuscany, a picturesque one. Indeed in this blessed land the most common acts of life—so it be in the country, or at least off the track of the tourist—are possessed of some peculiar charm.

Early, very early, in the summer mornings, while the light is still grey and chilly, the men are out in the fields to dig up roots for the day's peeling, and these, after the old leaves have been cut away and the new shoots carefully laid aside for future planting, are carried down on carts to the *fattoria* to be weighed. They are then given over to the peasant girls of the place—supplemented, if the crop be a large one, by girls hired from neighbouring

villages, who come and stay from the Monday till the Saturday of each week until the work is done.

The peasants themselves peel their own small crops at home in their spare time; but the *padrone's* crops are peeled in some shed or out-house belonging to the Villa, and dried upon long tables set up on the terrace near the house.

For nearly six weeks the work continued, and every morning a party of eighteen or twenty girls gathered under a roof of fir branches and heather—a cool retreat in those hot, drowsy days of August, when *Messer lo frate Sole* beats pitilessly down.

There from sunrise till sunset they sat, a gay party, singing choruses and *stornelli*, telling stories, laughing and chatting blithely, as with sharp sickle-bladed knives they peeled busily, their swift, practised fingers adding momentarily to the pile of cool, fragrant roots, ready to be carried to the Villa when the sun went down.

Of course Bianca Maria wanted to have her share in all these labours, and—with a blunt knife—achieved the elementary scraping of many roots, which were afterwards (secretly, that her pride might not be wounded) finished off in workman-like manner by sharper blades and more experienced hands.

Evening after evening, as the sun went down in a blaze of glory behind the mountains, writing in symbols of gold and crimson the "finis" of another working day, Orlando used to appear upon the great terrace with a cart drawn by a sage and elderly pony, and unload the sacks full of freshly peeled roots to add to the piles already drying upon the *stoie* or cane mats.

These roots on their arrival were fresh and fat, crisp as young radishes, pure white and fragrant, with a cool dampness which made them very agreeable to clasp in a hot hand, as Bianca Maria and I agreed. Their shapes, too, were eccentric and often comical, especially those of some years' growth, resembling, as they did, stately long-necked geese, grotesque little dwarfs, and all kinds of queer creatures; and each evening it was a fresh excitement for Bianca Maria to look over the new consignment and see what funny figures she could find.

Day and night the roots were left upon the *stoie*, as the moonlight is supposed by the Tuscan peasant to have some mysteriously beneficial effect upon them, though in reality it is the dew which does the good.

But as the days passed the plump and well-proportioned pieces shrivelled to half their

original bulk, lost their scent, and became hard as bits of wood; and each day's consignment, so soon as it attained to this desirable condition, was carried off and stored away, ready to be ground to powder to supply the Florentine and the far-off London and Parisian shops.

All over the world goes the Florentine orris root, but it has other uses besides that to which it is put by the scent and soap makers, and one of these is the supplying of "fingers," which are cut from the roots; these fingers being given to babies to aid them, instead of the old-established coral, in that tedious process of tooth-cutting, through which, though we retain no memory of it, we have all, with tears and tribulation, passed.

But of course the primary object in the growth of orris remains its value as a perfume; and as that, for those who love Tuscany, it must always have a peculiar attraction, make a particular appeal.

Few things quicken memories like perfumes. The sense of smell is one of the most potent in calling up and recreating a vanished past. A wreath of vegetable smoke from a bonfire blows across our path, and we are back in the moorland farm where we spent a long past summer; as by magic a thousand half-forgotten details

rise before our mind. Or it is a handful of dried lavender, which recalls to us some quaint old English garden where the hot air quivers above the many coloured flowers, where the fruit-trees clothe the mellow-tinted walls and the great bushes of purple-grey flowers fill with their spicy odour all the happy, sheltered place. Or the scent of a violet, a freezia, a lily, steals across to us. We start involuntarily; our hearts beat faster, our faces pale. We had believed that the old wound was quite healed, that the grass of utter forgetfulness grew upon the grave where that old sorrow was buried. But the violets, the lilies, yet remember; they have passed on the secret from one generation to another; they will never cease to remind us of that past of which we would fain be rid until we pass into the land where all things are forgotten—that quiet country where regret shall trouble us no longer, where even remorse shall at last be lulled to sleep.

But from the memories which the fragrance of the orris stirs for me I desire no deliverance—they are too beautiful; for whenever a breath of its perfume blows across my way, I see again these pale purple lakes, wind-ruffled beneath the clinging silver mist of the olives; recall once more those still summer nights when the air was full of the scent of the drying roots,

and in the profound silence, while the fire-flies wove their magical embroidery above the corn-fields, the rising moon poured its pale gold upon the country, and the stars looked down upon the sleeping land.

IX

OUR MORNING WALK

It was July, and the height of the Tuscan summer. Florence, far off on the plain, was half empty, scorched by the unrelenting sun, and I, high up in the hills in my summer retreat, for the attainment of which so long a stretch of white, sun-baked road must be traversed, looked down upon the city in the distance, folded in its heat mists, and rejoiced that I was not there.

I was, indeed, too happy upon my hillside to wish to be in any place where I was not. I had solitude, silence, scenery, and summer, long blue days and starlit nights—what more could I desire?

The hot, languorous dreamy days drifted by somewhat idly, it must be admitted; but effort and energy are of necessity a little relaxed with the thermometer at 90 degrees in the shade, and every day I found it easier to understand and make allowances for the indolence of the people in the South. Still, to resign oneself entirely to this enervating influence was baleful, morally and physically—physically, because

those who eat healthily and sit still manifest a distressing tendency to fatten; morally, because I have learned from experience that the less one does the less one wants to do: so to combat this twofold peril I broached to Bianca Maria the idea of an early morning walk.

Her imagination was fired by the prospect. To rise early, to dress by stealth with my assistance while Alduina still slumbered heavily, to slip out at that unwonted hour into the garden and away to the hills and pine-woods—surely herein lay the apotheosis of desire, and for once—

"One only will was in us twain."

"Che bell' idea!" she cried ecstatically, relapsing into her native tongue in her eagerness; and the next morning when, at four o'clock, I crept stealthily in the pale twilight along the dim passages to the night nursery, I found her already awake, and watching with impatience for my advent—indeed she reproached me for my tardiness in coming (though Alduina usually finds difficulty in rousing her at seven), such a fine flavour does novelty add to the common acts of life.

This early toilet was to be a hasty one, the morning tub and all such ritual being reserved for our return, and after some struggle with

refractory tapes and buttons, and loud-whispered directions from Bianca Maria as to the order in which her small garments must be adjusted, we stole down, like two conspirators, through the dark and silent house.

There is something strange, well-nigh uncanny, in being the one waking soul in a sleeping household; the slumber, in which all action and conscious life is suspended, seems close akin to death, and the dreams and visions of the night which stand beside the sleeper's pillow become to the watcher almost like real presences, ghostly intruders which disturb and mar one's peace. Strong in the darkness, this sensation is accentuated by the daylight; and when we had filled our pockets with biscuits, like all wise explorers, and slipped out on to the terrace, it was with something like awe that I looked back at the quiet house and pictured all the still forms which lay within it, unconscious, while their spirits wandered in those strange, mysterious regions, among those phantoms which are the true realities of the night, yet vanish as mist before the sun in the moment of returning consciousness, so alien and antagonistic are our waking and our sleeping lives.

As we set out from the Villa the light was very quiet and grey, and a heavy dew rested upon the grass and drowsy flowers. Every-

where there was a mystery of silence, cool and fragrant, the purity of a world renewed, regenerated in the darkness, which man had not yet defiled. There is something profoundly sacred about the hour of the dawn, whether it break upon us in the city streets or in the solitude of hill and forest. It lends a solemnity to even the most prosaic objects, something of that remote dignity which is the gift of death; for is not the austere peace upon the faces of the dead but the dawning light of a new and perfect day? Even the toys which the children had left on the garden seat all night looked strange and unfamiliar; the ranks of Annunciation lilies were unapproachable in their passionate purity; and there was a gravity even in the gaze of the pale blue chicory, usually the most friendly and candid of flowers, which fringed the road, as of some sweet secret learned beneath the myriad eyes of night. For a little while mystery rested upon the earth as the memory of dreams; the light, though clear, was very cold, and down on the plain the cupolas and belfries of Florence rose from the mist like islands or ships at sea. But before long the sun rose above the mountains; its rays caught the hill-crests—first to be saluted as last to be forsaken—and gradually creeping along the valleys, gilded the white walls of farm and

villa, momentarily spreading until all the land was bathed in light. The folded flowers opened their petals to smile back at the sun; the air, indescribably pure and fresh, was fragrant with the mint and thyme and sage which we crushed beneath our feet, and with the aromatic sweetness of the wild lavender which grew everywhere upon the hills.

Up the slope we climbed, having left the road behind us at the first opportunity, both of us preferring the untrodden to the beaten track. The ascent, even at that early hour, proved heating to the body as well as exhilarating to the spirit; and Bianca Maria soon began to murmur against the sailor jacket into which I had buttoned her as protection from the chilly morning air.

"Am hot," she protested, "and I have need to repose myself; in this coat so thick I arrive never at the top!"

However, in spite of these complaints, we finally, laughing and breathless, reached the summit, which was crowned by a peasant's house and a tiny church, to which the priest climbs at rare intervals to celebrate Mass. A grove of cypresses sheltered the two buildings, and from this isolated cone of earth the ground sloped down on every side.

We sat down, exultant in our freedom, for

a few minutes' rest in the shadow of the cypresses beside a great patch of scarlet, dew-drenched poppies, Bianca Maria seizing the favourable opportunity for refreshment, while I, more indifferent to the charms of gingerbreads, surrendered myself to the loveliness of the hour and scene.

In front, beyond a succession of low foothills, lay the plain, with Florence as its centre; behind us the valley descended more steeply, rising into a succession of higher and yet higher hills, the most distant forming a wall which met the sky. They made the hill up which we had struggled look painfully insignificant, now that we had reached its summit and saw how much there was beyond. But that is the case with other things than climbing: happiness may be more in hope than fulfilment, and it is rather the eagerness of the pursuit than the attainment which gives its zest to life. Often by the time we have attained a thing long desired we have outgrown it; it fascinates less keenly in substance than in imagination; the distant mountains are no longer blue when we reach them; the glamour has faded, and ambition and hope have leapt forward, as Bianca Maria's and mine now did, to the hills beyond. But that is, after all, a healthy tendency: to cease to desire is to cease to develop.

A creeper when it no longer puts out its tiny hands to clasp more stonework, has ceased to grow, and entered upon a period of decadence, which is the prelude to death: a stream becomes stagnant and brackish when it no longer flows forward towards the sea. And as with natural forces, so it is with the lives of men. Mere acquiescence in either joy or sorrow, glad or sad conditions, is fatal; a sure sign of waning powers, growing lethargy, or spiritual decay. Life, if it is to be lived at all according to its splendid possibilities, must be lived with the thrill of enthusiasm, with an eager looking forward to better things beyond. "A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's Heaven for?" We are all the children of Eve—to whom, according to theologians, a large proportion of our misfortunes are owing, but some of us, unluckier still, trace our pedigree by way of Lot's wife, from whom we inherit our unhappy taste for looking back; and as continual and regretful retrospection acts like an opiate on all vigorous and vital purposes, we, like her, become spiritually, if not physically, inert as pillars of salt.

These musings were, however, far too moral for five o'clock on a summer morning, and Bianca Maria becoming a little aggrieved at my silence, I restored her to good-humour by

the more frivolous occupation of making poppy dolls. By-and-by a peasant woman, her sickle thrust through her belt behind, in the way which always seems so perilous, drew near and looked at us curiously, wondering no doubt what could have brought the Signorine from their beds at an hour when the illustrious ones of the earth are usually sleeping, and only the working folk astir.

She did not look very much as if she felt the influence of that magical morning, for her greeting was half surly—though perhaps it was but shyness—and after a prolonged stare she passed on down the path to cut grass for the cattle, it being one of the regular duties of the peasant women to gather fodder for the animals, bearing back their great bundles of green, scented herbage on their heads.

Rising in a few minutes we went on our way, being obliged to descend the hill for some distance before we struck the direct track again, since only ambition and not necessity had led us to the top.

There were very few people astir at that early hour: a shepherd going out with his flock, accompanied by his white Maremma-bred sheep dog; groups of peasants digging up the day's supply of orris root in the fields; women, barefooted and bareheaded, returning with drip-

ping copper pitchers from the spring. A good distance many of them had to come to fetch their water in those days of drought, when all the streams were dried up, and for miles around there was only one unfailing fountain bubbling out of the rock and flowing down to the thirsty ground. From all the neighbouring country the people came in the cool of the evening and the early morning to fetch water, and those who too readily condemn the Tuscan peasant as dirty, have doubtless little idea of the difficulty of cleanliness in a country where the distance from which water must be carried makes even the bringing of a couple of pails an undertaking, and where often in the busy round of the peasant's day there is not time even to do that. Indeed, one can hardly expect the people to be very enthusiastic over their ablutions, personal or domestic, when it is only by much fatigue that they can get enough for themselves and the beasts to drink.

Even for the Villa itself all the water has to be carried, during the drought, in vats upon an ox-cart, and I am sure that to the peasants it must seem to be "love's labour lost," and a shocking waste of energy, when they toil to the spring twice a day with their patient team to bring back water for our many baths. They doubtless think us extraordinarily dirty people

to need so much washing! Themselves, they do not feel the necessity of more than a "dusting" during the week, with a superficial washing of the hands and face on Sunday; indeed one peasant woman, to whom the question of a bath for her aged mother was broached, replied without shame or hesitation, "Ma la mamma non ha *mai* fatto un bagno in vita sua!" and this being so, perhaps it would have seemed a rather drastic measure to begin at eighty-five! "Non fa bene tutta quest' umidità a questa stagione, Signorina," remarked the maid warningly, as she brought in my bath one chilly morning; and far from desiring to emulate my cleanly habits, I believe she secretly congratulates herself on needing washing less than I!

The pleasant sound of running water welcomed us as we drew near to the fountain, and, called by its soft music, we traced it to where, in a cool maidenhair-lined cleft of rock, was born this child of the clouds and earth. In a thicket near by the birds, soon to be mute in the hot, silent noonday, when all creatures are hushed except the *cicale*, were singing joyously. The industrious bees were already up and doing, humming loudly above the broom and clover. In the path Bianca Maria found, to her immense delight, and traced all the way until we again struck an upward track, an ant's highroad, along

which the tiny creatures were hastening in thousands, quite as absorbed, to the exclusion of all outer objects, in the business, warlike or peaceful, on which they were bent as we in our most serious moments are. A sandy cart-track running round the hillside, shaded in places by groups of stone-pines, was the one which we now followed, and above and below it spread, a glorious carpet woven by nature, fields of yellow broom, a pure, glad yellow, a new and lovely representation of the Field of the Cloth of Gold — with this difference, that instead of those emulous, envious kings there was no one to dispute *this* field, no one even to wonder at it except two happy and most simple-minded people rejoicing in the beauty of the day. But Nature does not trouble about spectators; she is as lavish of her colour in a desert as in a palace garden, the crimson of the geranium which blooms in the cripple's garret is as rich and pure as that which opened in the hot-house of a king, and all Solomon's glory, sufficient as it was to quench the spirit of the Queen of Sheba, could have been as nothing in comparison with the opulent splendour of these gold-decked slopes. Golden flowers and an azure sky! What lovelier sight had earth to offer? I refused to allow Bianca Maria's desire to be up and doing hasten me. I wished to

sit still there in that golden thicket, and, leaning back, watch the tracery of yellow, winged blossoms, of golden spires like the minarets of some fairy city, against the cloudless sky. This was the true Eldorado, unspoiled, uninvaded; this was the vision of that city whose "very streets are paved with gold, surpassing clear and fine."

But alas for the futility of human wishes! Bianca Maria was all agog to go forward, following the invitation of the path; and who can surrender herself wholly to the sweet influences of nature when a sprightly seven-year-old of unquenchable spirit is beseeching her to cast aside the spirit of delay, and with "Excelsior" as motto, follow the upward track?

Our road led us by an old house, evidently in ancient days a stately fortified dwelling, but long since abandoned, and now roofless, its walls crumbling, its once hospitable hearths overgrown with briars and weeds. Traces of the great halls could yet be distinguished, and the outer walls still rose strong and high, capped with ivy and pierced in places with lovely *bifora* windows, around the delicate stone mouldings of which creepers had twined their tiny hands.

Of course Bianca Maria wanted to know why

the people had gone away and left their house deserted. Who knows? Had they been driven out in the old tempestuous days, and their home dismantled through party jealousy or family feud? had it been fire or banishment, fraternal dissensions, death, or poverty which had left the old house void? A ruined home is always sad, if it be but a bird's nest—the tiny circle of moss or mud which is yet large enough to enclose within its narrow limits a paradise of love; much more, then, is it sad to see the place left desolate in which, generation after generation, must have echoed the pattering of little feet; which must have witnessed the tender romances of young girls, the going forth of ambitious lads in search of fame and fortune, the rejoicings over life beginning, the mournings for life which had reached its close. One pictures all the domestic scenes of a long-past day, the blazing fires on the hearth now overgrown with nettles, the music and laughter where now the owls hoot and the night-winds blow, and where neither weeping nor merry-making shall ever again find place; where all the secretness and sacredness of home are violated, and bridal, birth, and death-chamber alike thrown open to the gaze of all who pass, to sun and rain and storm.

For a moment we sat to rest upon a moss-

grown wall, once the boundary of some stately terrace or garden, now clothed in its decay with lichens by the kindly hand of Time. A lizard, called by the sun, crept out of a crevice and ran along the parapet, then raised its head and listened, with a curious intentness as though he heard voice or music calling to him from very far away. Who knows what he heard? What green thoughts passed through his tiny head in that green and golden world?

I should like some day, if I had the leisure to pass hour after hour, day after day, motionless in one place, to cultivate an intimacy with a lizard; they are dainty, fascinating little creatures, and I believe quite responsive to overtures of friendship—if conducted without due haste upon the part of man. Indeed, I have heard of an invalid lady who, lying day after day upon her sofa in a Tuscan garden, succeeded in taming a lizard so completely that he would come running at her call, and even allow himself to be fondled; but it was plain that something of the old Adam lurks even in the heart of a lizard, for he manifested a violent and unappeasable jealousy if any of his relatives put themselves forward or evinced a desire to be in their turn caressed!

Our ultimate destination, the goal which I had set before us, was the "Sasso scritto," a

mysterious block of graven stone, whose cryptic legend no scholar has as yet succeeded in deciphering, so strange are the characters cut deep into its side.

Bianca Maria's interest in this archæological wonder was, it must be owned, superficial, although she had been all eagerness to see it, but I lingered over it, longing to fathom its secret, to know whether this strange block of stone had served as sacrificial altar in the grim rites of some stern religion, or whether it marked the resting-place of a long-forgotten Etruscan king; speculation was, however, entirely vain and idle in a case where the learned had failed to read the riddle, and I turned unsatisfied away.

As we bent our footsteps homewards the sun had already risen high above the mountains; the heat even at that hour warned us of what it would be at midday, and Bianca Maria's stout bare legs flagged visibly as we toiled up the last hill to the house. But even in her weariness she was supported by her pride in so unusual an achievement, and when, refreshed by her tub, she appeared radiant at the breakfast table, it was with the lofty manner of one who condescends—visibly!—that she greeted her cousins, so lately wrapped in what, should her English have been sufficient to supply the term

(which it was not), she would doubtless have described as "slothful sleep." However, we all have our small weaknesses, and it is perhaps a little uplifting to have stolen a march on the rest of the household, and have snatched from unconsciousness three of the loveliest hours in the twenty-four; besides, there is the pure gain of it! for every bit of beauty which we see and delight in becomes in a very real sense our possession, part of ourselves—and for a possession so lovely as those hours in that radiant, unspoiled world, was it not worth while to forego a "little folding of the hands to slumber"? was not that small effort in the early, grey twilight a very small price to pay for a thing so perfect as our morning walk?

X

THE FEAST OF CORPUS DOMINI

In Tuscany—that home of saints and of picturesque customs—there is no village which has not its own great festival, its own particular *santo* or *beata* whom it delights to honour; but in addition to those which are sacred to particular districts, there are the greater days which are observed universally, and kept as both holy-days and holidays throughout the land.

Of all the *festas* which star the firmament of the Tuscan year, there are few which the people love more deeply or observe more devoutly than the ancient one of Corpus Domini, which had its origin in 1263, within two years of the birth of Dante, in one of the loveliest parts of the country of the blessed Francis—that city of Bolsena, which lies on the shores of the quiet silver lake.

For it was there in Bolsena that the young German priest, Pietro, who, sore vexed with questioning as to the truth of the Real Presence in the Mass, had journeyed into Italy, hoping that his doubts might be set at rest in that land of faith and vision, drew near to the altar of Santa

Cristina to offer the sacrifice. And as he stood before the altar a wonderful thing happened, the like of which had never before been seen; which miracle was no less than the issuing of drops of blood from the sacred wafer, in proof of the Real Presence therein. Then Pietro, filled with awe, hastened to tell his story to the Pope; and a great company went forth to bring, with reverence and much pomp, that most holy relic to Orvieto, where above it, before many years had passed, the great cathedral rose. And even now, when centuries have passed, the Church yearly celebrates the miracle, not stinting either pageant or procession in honour of the most holy Body of Christ.

Wonderful processions have I seen year by year in the Florentine Cathedral; processions in which all the companies and brotherhoods of the city, bearing their ancient crucifixes and Madonnas, wound round the building, followed by the priests in robes of scarlet and purple, lace and embroidery, brocade and fur, while beneath a canopy, bowed by the solemnity of that which he bore, walked the archbishop, holding up for the adoration of the kneeling throng the Host, in which they see the very Body of the Lord.

Yet beautiful as it is to see the hundreds of quaintly garbed figures when, the procession

ended, they bend before the altar, their cowls turned back from their faces, the flames of their torches quivering with the vibration of the air, as the ears of wheat in a wind-swept cornfield, while above them—that to which all eyes turn —the altar blazes with lights; the times when I remember most tenderly the Feast of Corpus Domini are when my thoughts turn to a little church high up among the Tuscan hills, where the peasants, with a beautiful simplicity entirely Italian, keep the feast.

How the last time I witnessed it lingers in my memory! How gladly would I recall that faded summer day! For a week we had discussed the approaching *festa*, with anxious surmises as to what the weather, so fitful of late, should be. The best flowers were left uncut in the garden, since not only the church itself but every shrine and tabernacle where the procession should pass needed decking with garlands and green boughs. Peasant mothers were busy washing white frocks, young girls preparing wreaths of the artificial flowers which are in their eyes so much more desirable than real ones, and the brass band from the neighbouring village was practising diligently that it might do itself credit on the eventful day.

Corpus Domini falling that year on a Thursday, the great procession was fixed for the fol-

lowing Sunday, and very early in the morning, while the sky was still grey and the air a little chilly, I heard Bianca Maria at the window, satisfying herself that it "made fine weather." Apparently her mind was set at rest by the prospect, for in another moment there was a pattering of little bare feet on the red-brick floor and then silence, so I suppose that she had returned reassured to that region which she had but for a moment quitted—the Land of Dreams.

Certainly by the time I sallied out into the garden, the day was all that a June day should be. The deep blue sky was cloudless, the whole earth bathed in sunshine; through a veil of silvery haze rose, far down on the plain, the belfries and cupolas of Florence; the ripe corn stood motionless beneath the olives, the rows of white lilies in the garden were still touched with the benediction of the undried dew. Already the air was loud with the joy of countless *cicale;* brilliant butterflies fluttered by on frail, quivering wings; all the air seemed vibrating with glad lives rejoicing in the promise of the perfect summer day.

Of course the morning of so great a *festa* saw us all at church, even three-year-old Pio, who, generally excluded by his insufficient years from the congregation of the faithful, almost wept

with the pride and joy of finding himself numbered with the elect.

Pio usually spends the hour of Mass with his nurse in the garden, in the more secular occupation of mud-pie making; but even Ersilia was going to the festal service on that Sunday, so there being no one to—as he expressed it —*badare* him, Pio was perforce conducted to church with the rest.

His toilet—an important one in his eyes, considering the solemnity of the occasion—was begun early; and long before service time, in a clean and much-starched frock, a large straw hat, minute brown shoes, and white cotton gloves, which caused him to hold every small finger stiffly extended, he descended the stairs with dignity, clasping under his arm a large packet of devotional picture-cards upon which to meditate in church.

Being anxious, as all good Christians should be, that others might share his own spiritual privileges, he wished to be accompanied by his "son," a small doll in a painted bathing-costume, whom he had dressed for divine service by folding a piece of cambric round him and thrusting him through the belt of his frock—indeed, it needed much persuasion and no small amount of tact to persuade him that "Giuseppe" would "find himself better" at home.

It was distinctly provoking for one in so exalted a frame of mind that Bianca Maria, brushing inadvertently against him, should scatter his budget of saintly cards, strewing them about the hall like autumn leaves, and the house at once was vocal with Pio's woe.

In vain we tried to console him by the restoration of his scattered treasure; his feelings were wounded by such lack of respect for one whose feet were even then turned towards the holy place; there was no balm in Gilead, and he refused all comfort, and abandoned himself to his emotions, until, his mother observing with some severity: "But, Pio, if thou makest thus the capricious, it is impossible that thou go to church," surprise and apprehension dried the tears upon his cheeks, as with a wondering and awe-struck voice he asked, "Why, should I make fear to the priest?"

Arrived at the church without further misfortune, we ranged ourselves along the gallery, Pio between his mother and me, Bianca Maria on my other side, and the rest of the children at a greater distance, according to their age and discretion, to right and left.

The women were already in their places, but the whole male portion of the congregation, according to established custom, was still grouped

outside upon the steps discussing the crops and the prices of cattle, until such time as the priest should take his place at the altar, when they all trooped in.

It was a picturesque little congregation upon which we looked down. The peasant women were in the front rows, with their bright dresses, and the aprons without which no self-respecting *contadina* would think her *festa* costume complete: the black lace veils over their hair lending a certain distinction and poetry to even the plainest face. Old men, worn with more than half a century's work upon the land, sat spelling out prayers in large print books; old women, crouched on the steps of the confessionals, turned their rosaries in their withered hands. Up in the gallery all the little girls had removed their hats, which were piled upon the window-seat like gigantic yellow mushrooms, and knelt in a row, reading laboriously in small manuals of prayer, while Pio, seated upon a stool, gazed devoutly at his pictures one by one.

Only once did the rule of silence laid upon him before starting become too grievous to be borne any longer; and that was when, after long and earnest study of a highly coloured "Flight into Egypt," he pulled my sleeve and asked in a shrill whisper, "How does he call himself,

that pretty little donkey?" nor was he satisfied until, with an air of conviction, I had whispered back a suitable name.

At sermon time the old priest made an impassioned appeal for orderly and reverent behaviour on the part of all those who intended to join in the afternoon's procession. He had, he declared, witnessed the previous year most unseemly conduct on the part of the "angels," which convinced him that such exhortation was not superfluous nor out of place. It appeared that as he, poor old man, being prevented by illness from himself taking part in the function, was watching it complacently from his bedroom window, rejoicing in its beauty and well-ordered length, he beheld a sudden, entirely irregular movement among the younger members—those very angels who were his especial pride—and saw them, to his horror, break loose from the solemn line, and, scaling some magnificent cherry-trees which, laden with fruit, overhung the road, proceed to eat their fill! Was this conduct worthy of an angel? a thousand times no! and he worked himself into a perfect fever of earnestness in his injunctions that never should such a thing occur again. Certainly it was something of a breach of that orderly demeanour required of those who walk in processions, and yet there was

something about it entirely delightful! How I should have loved to see those quaint little figures in their white robes and tinsel wings perched up in the fruit-trees, like the charming, prim little angels, with their apples and plums and double cherries, which charm us to-day in so many a stiff old picture or altar-piece! Still, it was clear to any right-minded person that such conduct was entirely reprehensible, and Bianca Maria was deeply impressed by the story; so much so that, in leaning over the gallery that she might hear the better, she gave an unlucky push to her "Holy Childhood," causing it to fall with a smart bang upon the head of Orlando down below!

Service over, we made our way back to the house in that leisurely manner which befits all Sunday doings, passing, with neighbourly greetings to the peasants, through the old moss-grown stone gateway, and between the ilexes and pink roses which bordered the avenue. The little girls had relaxed their saintly demeanour on leaving the sacred building, but Pio was yet in a state of exaltation, which manifested itself in a somewhat officious desire to reprove his elders, and nothing could have exceeded the stern rebuke of the tone in which he exclaimed "Sciupona!" when Bianca Maria gathered and brought to me a scarlet pome-

granate flower—the only one as yet open on the tree.

The procession, the great event of the day, was not to take place until an hour before sunset; but long before that time we were hard at work weaving garlands of roses and lilies to deck the shrines of Madonna and the little wooden crosses which rise at every turn along the Tuscan roads.

How sweet and touching they are, and of how much the Reformation robbed our English land when it threw down the shrines and calvaries, with their silent appeal to all wayfaring men! Perhaps the irony of them would be too great in our modern progressive England, where silence and simplicity have receded before the invasion of the motor-car and the ever-growing struggle to be rich; but to me there will always be something missing, something unsatisfying, in a land where no time-worn wooden cross, testifying to the infinitely pitiful heart of Christ, stands at the country wayside, and no quiet-eyed Madonna looks down calmly upon the busy street.

The sun was already stooping towards the western mountains, throwing an intense golden light across the land, when the chanting in the distance heralded the procession which, a few moments later, wound slowly into sight.

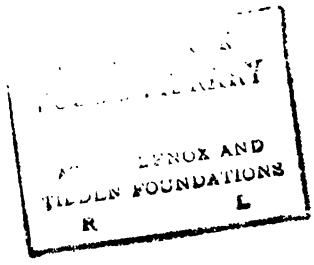
First walked a man in a dark-blue linen ephod, scattering olive leaves and broom blossoms—a carpet of gold and silver—along the road; an action full of poetry when one considers it; for is there not something very beautiful in the idea of decking even the dust for this feast of the Body of Christ, a feast in which surely the dust *should* have its part, since from it was taken all flesh, and so even the human Body of the Lord?

Behind this forerunner came the round-cheeked, dark-eyed children, their angel wings attached to their shoulders, carrying lighted tapers and bunches of flowers in their chubby hands, and undoubtedly on their best behaviour, looking about them, half-wondering and half-shy.

Following the children came the young girls of the place, wearing white veils and wreaths of flowers, and carrying wands to which bunches of flowers were attached. Behind them walked, two and two, the married women, in their black wedding dresses and black veils, carrying tapers in their hands. Of all ages they were, from the *Biondina*, but lately a bride, her fair hair shining beneath her veil, to old women bent with the burden of their years, their candles shaking in their wrinkled hands. All these passed on slowly, very slowly, down the hill-

Photo. G. R. Ballance.

A WAYSIDE SHRINE.


LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

side, and behind them came the men and boys in white surplices, girded round the waist with a cord, carrying torches and singing as they went. Some were little lads only just admitted to the dignity of the brotherhood; others bent with fifty or sixty years' continuous toil, with dark, lined faces and knotted hands.

Next passed the bandsmen, playing lustily, while from time to time the chant was taken up all down the line—by childish trebles and clear women's voices, by the strong basses of men and the quivering, tremulous notes of age.

After the band came several priests from neighbouring parishes, who had gathered to add, by their presence, to the dignity of the *festa;* and last of all, very feeble, bent with the weight of more than eighty years, walked the old priest beneath a canopy, while the acolytes swung their censors about the Holy Thing he held. All knelt reverently at his passing; and it was a pretty sight to see the little girls grouped about their mother, in their white frocks, with folded hands, and eyes filled with wonder at this mystery which, though they knew to be holy, they could not even dimly understand.

After the priest followed all the rest of the peasants, and the procession wound down the hill among the olives in the golden light of the

June evening, to offer flowers and pray at Madonna's shrine before returning to the little church, that she too might have some share in the joy of this feast in honour of her Son. Fainter and fainter grew the singing and the music, until presently the sound of many feet, the swelling of the chant, announced their return, and we followed along the avenue between the cypress and ilex trees, the pink roses and rows of white Annunciation lilies; past the little Calvary, where some one had fastened a bunch of red roses—perhaps in memory of the red blood which came from the wafer—to the church.

The building was crowded—indeed by the time we arrived it was impossible for any more to enter; so we, like a great part of the congregation, waited outside in the tiny piazza by the priest's house until such time as service should be done.

Italians are gay even in their religion, mingling a certain free-and-easiness with their devotions, so that it was not surprising that there was a good deal of hilarity in that portion of the congregation left outside. I tremble to think what the atmosphere must have been *inside*, for although every now and then half-a-dozen people spluttered out into the fresh air in the explosive manner of boiling water

from a tap, the mass within never seemed any less solid for their absence, and when the whole congregation finally poured out it was amazing to see how many the narrow walls had really held.

The singing which reached us was deafening, for the country people always sing *a squarcia gola* in church, as they believe that the louder the voices the better they are heard by God! Certainly they all looked much heated when they emerged from their devotions, but probably all were somewhat oppressed by the weight of their festal clothes. A *festa* naturally necessitates one's best raiment, however conflicting may be the conditions of the weather and the texture of the cloth; and as the men usually pride themselves upon a serviceable suit of the heaviest material, which they wear year in and year out whatever the temperature, they must need much pride to support them in the fierceness of the summer heat. Perhaps, however, they are less sensitive than we to climatic changes. I think it must be so; for although the warmth was to me, dressed as I was in the thinnest muslin, almost unbearable on that June day, I saw Orlando resplendent in a winter suit of immensely heavy tweed which the Marchese had lately presented him with, apparently un-

troubled by its weight. Four-year-old Attilio also attended church in a blue serge costume —vest, blouse, and knickerbockers, in which I should have expected him to melt like a crumb of wax in the flame, but he bore it with perfect equanimity, and it was not until they emerged from that seven-times heated church that his mother relieved him of the blouse and allowed him to walk home in his shirt sleeves.

We had been invited to go after the ceremony and refresh ourselves at the priest's house—indeed the *curato* had been to the Villa before eight o'clock the previous morning to invite us to the *festa*, and finding no one of the family about at that hour, had returned at midday, appearing in the dining-room hat in hand, and with only his skull-cap on his head, to beg us to honour the feast with our illustrious presence.

With immense pomp we were ushered into the little parlour, where glasses and wine were set out, together with two pathetic-looking plates of sweet cakes, shielded with a napkin from the flies. I believe that it was to make these poor little preparations for his *festa* that the old man had made a pilgrimage into the distant town the day before, and I felt almost loath to eat them, feeling that on means so narrow as his such luxuries could only have

been provided by the sacrifice of some necessity of life.

The priest lives with his sister, who is almost as old as he is; and as both are equally deaf it must often be quite a Comedy of Errors when they enter into conversation. She, like her brother, is little above the peasant class, and dressed as one of them, with a kerchief on her head. Rather a forbidding-looking person she seemed on that evening, but the poor soul was, I believe, a little carried away by this invasion of "illustrious ones" in her tiny house; for she stood, obviously embarrassed, throughout the entertainment, and never spoke except to press us to eat the cakes, which Bianca Maria and her cousins did without urging and with the best will in the world.

I thought as I looked at the old priest in his shabby, frayed cassock and mended shoes, what a strange and uneventful life his had been, judged by modern standards, when restlessness and discontent with existing conditions are such leading characteristics of the age. He had spent more than fifty years of his life in looking after a hundred and sixty souls in a rural district; he had never apparently made any progress or bettered his condition in any direction; he had never desired nor experienced change except once, forty years before, when,

in company with the bailiff, he had made a trip to Leghorn—a trip by which all the previous and subsequent events of his life were dated, just as the events of our era are dated by the birth of Christ. A colourless life it looked, as viewed by an outsider; without strong family ties—for I am sure that an easy toleration was the most that he accorded to his sister; without the love of wife or children, without ambition, or keen enthusiasm, or joy in the natural loveliness around him, or any very fervent devotion to the church and priesthood to which he had dedicated his life. There was nothing of the mystic, of the impassioned soul, to whom material things are nothing because the unseen things are all, about this old man. One felt that his unemotional acceptance of a monotonous lot was the acceptance of dull acquiescence, not of self-sacrificing zeal, and that in some pitiful manner the best things of life had passed him by; that if his apathy had saved him from any very poignant sorrow, it had also hindered him from experiencing any very poignant joy—and perhaps that is the most pathetic fate of any in this world.

Menchina, a lively, loud-voiced peasant and a dear friend of the children's, had been invited to assist in the entertainment, and bustled about getting seats for us, hurrying out from

time to time to keep an eye on the company of priests and *frati* refreshing themselves in the kitchen, no one but ourselves being allowed to penetrate within the holy of holies of the inner room. Only once did any one intrude, and then, with apologetic bows, an old *contadino* entered to ask, "Col permesso suo, Illustrissima," if he might fetch the stick left there by some *fratino* (a *frate*, if at all popular, being usually, whatever his size and age, referred to with this caressing diminutive!); but the priest's sister and Menchina both turned such stern faces upon him that he vanished as quickly as he came.

After refreshing ourselves we withdrew, the rest of the *festa* having been planned to take place on the great terrace in front of the Villa, when the band was to give an exhibition of its skill.

It was a picturesque scene in the summer twilight. The fire-flies flitted in and out among the ilex-trees and the mysterious darkness of the wood; a ring of lamps attached to the music-stands illuminated the flushed, distended cheeks of the musicians; the older folk lingered near this lighted circle, but it was noticeable that the younger ones showed a disposition to wander in more shadowy parts—not in couples (*that* would be forbidden by all the laws of

propriety); but the girls, apparently quite indifferent, and unconscious of the effect of the coquettish roses and pomegranate flowers in their hair, strolled up and down together, while the young men, standing in groups, cast admiring glances at the pretty ones, and sometimes even hazarded some flattering remark.

Pio, distressed by the loudness of the music and bewildered by so many people, clung close to his mother's side, but the little girls, very happy and important, went to and fro distributing biscuits to the children; and I saw Attilio, once more in the full splendour of his complete costume, looking fatter than ever as he munched his *brigidini;* and Emilio, elegantly attired in red-striped flannel, joyous as a *Pasqua,* as he strolled to and fro holding his *babbo's* hand.

At last, after an hour or two spent upon the terrace applauding the prowess of the band, and after the making of speeches and much cheering for the "noble family," the musicians went away, still playing, down the hill, the peasants trooping after them; and we heard the music grow fainter and fainter, until it died away and no sound or footstep disturbed the silence of the summer night.

The air was warm and absolutely still; the rose and gold had faded slowly behind the

western hills; the shadows crept up the valleys; the stars shone out. The outlines of the cypresses cut sharply against the green sky, which gradually deepened to sapphire; from time to time a caressing little breeze stole across the garden, stirring the lemon-trees; the air was fragrant with the aromatic perfume of rose and orange and of the lilies in their still ranks and the oleanders and pomegranates just bursting into bloom. The fire-flies flitted in and out among the trees and above the uncut corn. The fire-fly by day is a disappointment, an unromantic, unlovely brown insect; but as soon as the darkness gathers, a winged star—an emblem, surely, of some souls which, apparently commonplace enough in prosperity, shine out with a steadfast radiance when the night of adversity falls upon their lives. There was a low murmur of crickets and croaking of frogs from the fields below the terrace, forming an accompaniment to the song of the nightingales and the hooting of the owls. Slowly the waning moon rose above the mountains, bathing all the land in silver light and transfiguring the house, until it looked like a palace of ivory and pearl. A few stars shone in the darker parts of the sky; the dark grove of ilex and cypress was full of mystery; from time to time the summer lightning leaped

behind the cloud masses which were piled on the horizon in the north.

There is, for all susceptible to such influences, something profoundly sacred in the dark hours in the heart of the country. Not once only, but ever, does God walk in the garden in the cool of the day, and as we sit quietly, surrendering ourselves to the companionship of nature, trying, so far as be possible, to enter into communion with the green world around us, and to open our hearts to the benediction of the stars, the night becomes articulate, and revelations denied to us in the noise and hurry of the daytime are often vouchsafed us in the dark.

Ah yes, it was a perfect hour following upon a perfect day. Is it any wonder that it is of such village feasts I think when I recall with most affection the ancient feast of Corpus Domini?—that such days, such nights mysteriously lovely, are enshrined in my memory as a very precious thing?

XI

A FLORENTINE FUNERAL

It was half-past six on a February evening. The dying fires of a red sunset smouldered in purple mist behind the Carrara mountains; the Arno was still rose-flushed; a crescent moon hung high in the cold blue of the evening sky; the long line of lamps marking the curve of Lung' Arno shone like a chain of golden stars, and reflected themselves in a thousand glittering fragments of light in the water which flowed under the old bridges. Across the river the dome of San Ferdiano rounded itself in sharp, black outline against the sky. Dim yellow lights began to twinkle from the windows of the quaint old houses, which rise as a wall on the river's opposite bank. The night wind blew up a little coldly, and a passing officer flung one end of his voluminous grey cloak in picturesque folds across his shoulder, and, his spurs jingling and sword clanking, stalked by with all the dignity of a mediæval knight.

Suddenly, from a side street, appeared the hot glow of many torches, and there filed past one of the most picturesque, if not most weird,

sights of an Italian city—the Procession of the Dead.

Men may travel far and see many sights, strange, sad, or beautiful, but there is one common to all times and all countries, the home-going of the dead.

For sanitary reasons it is customary in Italy for funerals to take place at night, although in summer, when the sun sets late, it is not in the dark, but in the cool of the evening that the processions wind between the old high houses or along the quiet country roads. The humblest citizen makes his last journey with a certain pomp and circumstance, and no matter how obscure his life has been, all look on respectfully, raise their hats, and make way as Death in his person goes down the street.

The luminous Tuscan twilight, however, pales the flame of the candles, and cheapens almost to "staginess" the white robes of the bearers, the cowls through which their eyes gleam, the black banner with skull and cross-bones which they bear; and the time to see an Italian funeral in its full picturesqueness is on a dark winter evening, when the glare of the torches throws a lurid glow upon the old palaces and upon the faces of the passers-by.

When death is at hand a priest is called in to hear the last confession, administer extreme

unction, and fortify the departing soul with all the rites of Holy Church.

After the last breath has been drawn, a *camera ardente* is arranged, where the body is laid, dressed in its best—white for a child or young girl, black for an older woman, and uniform or black suit for a man. Around burn many candles, friends come to pray in the quiet room, and the dead person is ceaselessly watched until carried from the house.

Attached to each church is a company of "brothers," whose office it is to take turns in carrying the dead. The parishioners pay a subscription, as to a burial club, which entitles them, when the time for the last journey comes, to be borne to rest by the confraternity to which they belong.

Notice of a funeral having been given, the brothers meet at the sacristy of the church, where there is a great shaking out of white draperies, and the respectable artisans of a few minutes earlier emerge in all the dignity of linen ephods and cowls, which when drawn over the face show only the eyes peering through two holes. They shoulder the empty coffin, which has already been deposited under a pall in the middle of the church, and, carrying torches and accompanied by the priests, set off for the dead person's house.

In olden days it used to be customary for the relatives and friends of the bereaved family to gather at the house and wait outside the door, the simple citizens seated on mats, the cavaliers upon benches, until the body was carried out, when they accompanied it in procession to the Tower of the Guardamorto, which in those days stood near the Baptistery, and where it was exposed for eighteen hours, unless the family could obtain a dispensation from this formality and carry it direct to the church. So severely did the government of those days control the liberty of its citizens, that by the ancient laws the number of wax torches which might be burned, the clothes which the dead might wear at their obsequies, even the costumes of the mourners were all prescribed.

Perhaps, one must admit, it was well that there should be some rein put on the magnificence of those old funerals, when one remembers that in 1377 the burial of Monaldo, son of Messer Niccolaio degli Alberti, in Sta. Croce, cost no less than 3000 golden florins, nearly equivalent to £5000!

Monaldo's funeral-car was of red damask; he himself was dressed in red damask and cloth of gold; the whole church was lighted with great wax candles; all his relations and the women were robed in blood-red, the rest in

black. A wonderful pageant certainly; but as Monaldo went the way of all flesh on August 7 and was buried on August 8, there must have been some skilful organising and a world of bustle to prepare so pompous a funeral in so short a time!

Having received the body, the confraternity, followed by the relations, return to the church, reciting psalms as they go, and frequently dashing the flames of their torches on the ground and then again brandishing them aloft.

It was evidently the funeral of some great person which I met on that February evening, for the procession of brothers was very long; there were many priests, and behind followed a crowd of friends, of servants in livery, and members of various religious orders.

As the cortège, a weird and haunting sight, lit by the red glow of the torches, passed on down the street, a sudden curiosity impelled me to follow it to its destination in the great Dominican church of Sta. Maria Novella.

When I arrived it had already entered, and around the open west doors some of the brothers were waiting, their cowls pushed back from their faces, about which curled wreaths of blue smoke from the candles, while small impish boys hovered near in hopes of securing the droppings of the wax.

The ceremony was a strange, impressive sight, for the church was dark save for six great candles, which gleamed dimly from every altar, and shadows lurked in the corners of chapel and choir. The nave had been cleared of all seats, and in the centre, on a high catafalque, stood the coffin, dark and solemn beneath the pall, from which grinned ghastly skulls. There were masses of flowers, wreaths of more than a man's height, woven of every colour and set on easels, bearing long crêpe or ribbon streamers, with inscriptions embroidered in gold.

On either side of the coffin, facing each other, stood a row of priests and Dominican friars chanting, in slow, monotonous tones the Office for the Dead. The brothers who had carried the coffin were also drawn up in line, forming an oblong space, in the midst of which the coffin stood. Each still held his long two-wicked candle, and grouped around, all with tapers in their hands, were the relations and friends of the dead man, his servants, the members of religious orders he had benefited, the children of schools and orphanages he had helped.

The flickering tapers threw a warm, yellow light on the priests, on the mourners, and, more faintly, on the faces, careless or pitiful,

of the bystanders who had followed the procession in.

The sprinkling of the coffin with holy water, the absolution of the body, were over. The solemn refrain went on with wailing monotony, the priests chanting in dull stolidity, without any "mitigation or remorse of voice": "Libera me, Domine, de morte æterna in die illa tremenda. Quando cœli movendi sunt et terra. Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison!"

In the background a pretty girl was whispering with a young man, and throwing glances, half-pitiful, half-indifferent, at the silent, solemn object which was the centre of all this pageant. She and her lover were just on the threshold of life and hope; death seemed very far away. The cry of an infant in its mother's arms cut the monotony of the chant. A poor woman, her basket set down beside her, knelt on the step of one of the side altars; her lips moved quickly as, with clicking rosary, she recited her aves and paternosters, while her dark eyes roved carelessly over the crowd. An Englishman, fresh-coloured, side-whiskered, edged his way out of the throng near the coffin, saying to his companion in loud tones, "Well, if this isn't rank idolatry, I should like to know what is!" He was close to the mourners as he spoke, and the majority of educated Italians under-

stand English well. I perceived in that moment why they do not always esteem the English race so highly as they might.

The service was drawing to a close. The body would probably be left alone in the great dark church for one night, and be carried in the early morning to its resting-place in the Campo Santo beyond the gates; for though the *trasporto* from the house takes place in the evening, the actual burial may be sometimes, owing to the distance and the lateness of the hour, deferred until next day.

"The fashionable cemetery," as an Italian writer quaintly calls it, is in a position inexpressibly lovely on the San Miniato hill; and there is another at Trespiano, where the poorer people rest. These are of necessity large and ever extending, as not only is cremation little practised, but it is under the strictest ban of the Church, priests refusing to conduct the funeral of a cremated person, to have the ashes interred in holy ground, or even to visit and perform the last offices for one who is known to desire this committal to the fire of his "mortal coil."

Italian burial-grounds, however beautiful in themselves, are too often spoiled by vulgar and hideous monumental chapels. Hopes grow dim and visions fade away before such massive ugliness; so completely is the mason the master

there, that we look in vain for the Angel of the Tomb. The heavy slabs of marble, laid so close that no blade of grass may creep between them, seem as if meant to prevent any premature resurrection; to me they suggest awful dreams of some fantastic *Danse Macabre* above these paving-stones of death. In the country, among the olives and the cypress trees, are tiny graveyards, green, and full of sunshine and silence, where even one as much in love with life and the beauty of the world as I am may reconcile myself with death; but these are the burial-places of the poor. Where the rich lie it is all stone and gilding and iron grating, and it is by no means unusual to see life-size marble or bronze figures of the dead set upon the place of their resting, or a figure of a near relation mourning day and night above the tomb. It may be a mother bowed in hopeless grief above the little grave where her baby is buried, or a wife knocking passionately for admittance at the closed door through which her husband has passed. When, in this latter case, the disconsolate widow has been consoled, and is known in society again as a happy mother and matron, does she, one wonders, remove that desperate portrait of herself, or does it remain in its place, ever seeking entrance to the grave of the first love, while she dwells happy

as the wife of another man? Do they, perhaps, visit it together? In any case these impassioned figures, in which the emotional Latin nature finds consolation, must seem strange and a little theatrical when the first sharp edge of sorrow has worn dull.

In the great Campo Santo at Milan I have seen visiting-cards laid on All Souls' Day at the windows of mortuary chapels—meant, no doubt, as a sign of respect to the relations, but seeming almost a mockery of those silent inmates, who cannot open their fast-closed doors to any friendly call.

The very way in which Italians make the newspaper announcement of death proves the difference between them and the more reserved Northern races.

The curt *Times* announcement: "On the 4th of January, at Brighton, Geoffrey, only son of George and Elizabeth Fane, aged 21," is hardly suggestive of the heart-break which underlies the few cold words; it is a paragraph which does not take the world into its confidence. But an Italian paper is daily full of such emotional little notices as the following: "The sons and daughters, the brother and grandchildren [all named in turn], and all relatives, prostrated by grief, make the sorrowful announcement of the untimely and irreparable

loss of their adored mother, sister, grandmother, and relative, Giulia Rossi, who expired peacefully on February 16, after severe sufferings borne with saintly fortitude, comforted by all the rites of Holy Church.

"Requiescat in pace. Amen.
℣. Requiem æternam dona ei Domine,
℟. Et Lux perpetua luceat ei.
℣. Requiescat in Pace. Amen."

Petition and response followed me as I turned and went out again into the Piazza, and passed along the narrow street to the river, which had quite forgotten the hot crimson of the sun-god's kisses, and lay responsive to the white smile of the moon.

And as I went, mindful of the dark coffin and the inviolable peace of its silent occupant, so soon to make the last journey through the familiar streets, the words of Socrates echoed in my heart, as if a message from that solemn scene: "I go to death, you to life, and which of us goeth the better way, God only knows."

XII

ON THE TUSCAN HILLS

IT was on a radiant September day that Bianca Maria and I set out, fired by the spirit of adventure, to gather blackberries for our winter's store of jam.

For weeks day had followed day in a procession of cloudless beauty. Indeed, but for the dividing nights, when the stars sparkled like diamonds in the frosty sky, it would have seemed, so closely did one resemble another in the splendid sequence, like one glorious, changeless day. Morning after morning the Happy Valley was vaulted over by a sky of intense blue, against which the hill-walls cut in sharp lines, sheltering us from the winds of the outer world. Only at one end, where the valley opened on to the plain, did it pale a little towards the far horizon where the Casentino mountains met the sky.

Yet, for all its loveliness, to-day was not as yesterday. Summer was over; finally, decidedly, unquestionably over. In spite of the sunshine, the still warmth, there was no doubting nor denying the fact. All the previous

afternoon and evening a violent tempest had raged, and although the morning seemed to dawn as calm and golden as any of the preceding days, the storm had not left us where it found us, but had set a sharp, irrevocable line between our summer and autumn. It had been summer yesterday, although September; it was but September, and yet was autumn to-day. So it is that some great sorrow or revelation sometimes sets a sharp line between our youth and age—for age is little a matter of calendar dates or of the waxing and waning of moons; crucial moments are generally unheralded, and between two heart-beats a surprise may come to us, just as the storm which comes between two golden hours; and on the other side of that wide, wide gulf, a whole eternity, a whole moment, away, we find ourselves cast upon a shore where youth shall never stand with us again.

Still, autumn though it was, it was very lovely. When I awoke and looked out of my window early there was little colour on the near hills; their tree-clothed slopes and curves were veiled in faint mists like lingering dreams; but the garden round the house was full of glittering brightness, the lemon-pots threw deep shadows on the grass where the autumnal dew lay heavy, the geraniums and carnations

glowed in their parterres, and roses, pink, cream, and crimson, starred the surrounding hedge. There was a magical charm about that radiant morning world, which had received so lately heaven's messenger, the rain. Such loveliness was an invitation not to be unheeded, and, dressing hastily, I slipped down through the quiet house and out into the garden, which still retained that passionate purity and solemnity, that curious remoteness, which is nature's ever-renewed gift from night.

There was no one in the garden. I was the undisturbed possessor of all this beauty, and I sat on an old stone bench and looked at it with eyes which could not tire. The house, a dark solid pile, dating from the Middle Ages, lay at some distance from the road; in front was a square green pleasaunce, gay with flowers and lemon-trees, and surrounded by a hedge of roses; beyond lay a broad ditch with stone walls —once, doubtless, a moat for the protection of this lonely fortress, now merely the channel down which the mill-stream ran. But this stream, though to me somewhat lacking in force and volume, is still to Bianca Maria a great river, bound for some wonderful far-off land to which she launches her paper-boats; while in the garden every lemon-tree is for her hung with enchanted fruit, and the green alleys are a very

Eden of delights. Ah, what would I not give for her illuminated vision! How much we lose when the years drive us out of the Land of Make-believe! Things have grown so much smaller since our childhood. What had lingered in our memory as an enchanted forest where one went in sore peril of lions and tigers, not to speak of Red Indians and many savage tribes, proves, when revisited after long absence, a mere shrubbery. The mental picture was far lovelier than the reality. It is with hearts filled with regret, with the sense of having been robbed of some precious thing, that we come away. The mystery, the intangible charm, is gone for ever, as the dew which made the world at dawn a place so mysterious is gone when we return to the same scene at noon.

Well, if the years rob us of some of our romances they strengthen, as a rule, our sense of beauty, so perhaps the loss is equalled by the gain, and I was very happy on that September morning. Certainly a day so splendid must be spent, physically, at least, as near as possible to heaven—namely, on the hilltops; and I had little doubt that Bianca Maria would acquiesce cheerfully in my desire for a long ramble on the hills.

Nor was I wrong in my surmise. She pro-

nounced the plan "a thing very nice and that makes me pleasure," only stipulating that the party should include Federigo, her dog—the creature nearest to her heart.

It was two o'clock when we set out. The blue dome of sky curved over, pure, illimitable; the hips and haws glowed scarlet in the sunlight, the air was full of a sweet faint mumuring, as of a myriad glad creatures rejoicing in the splendour of the sun.

How happy the world seems sometimes! What must be the gladness of God when He looks down upon an earth so fair! We often have His severity set before us; why, I wonder, do priests and teachers not accentuate His joyousness more? Why do we always conceive of Him as hostile to happiness? Can He who made the world be without a sense of beauty, or He who taught the lark her song be destitute of joy? In towns it is hard to be ever very glad, for, even if personally free from trouble, there are too many visible sorrows all around; but out here on the Tuscan hills, in sight only of the sky and woods, life seems a very innocent and lovely thing.

Certainly it was a day on which to be happy, and there was little doubt that Bianca Maria was in good spirits and felt the gracious influence of the time and scene as she trotted

on, swinging her basket and singing at the top of her voice, "Mon père m' a donnè un mari," only pausing from time to time to put an unusually large berry into her mouth. Indeed, so magnificent were the berries that she flung her usual prudence to the winds, being, contrary to all precedent, quite unable to tell me how many she had eaten; and although I feared that suffering would be her ultimate portion, I felt a kind of wicked satisfaction in seeing Bianca Maria (whose extreme caution puts me to shame at times) let herself so completely go.

Up the hills we went, climbing on and on, ever urged forward by the promise which lay at every turn of the way.

It was a wonderful view upon which we looked down from the heights. Below lay the great upland plain of Arezzo; beyond, the mountains of the Casentino; close at hand the quiet undulations of the foot-hills. There was little colour in the sun-steeped landscape; there seldom is in Tuscan scenery. Tuscany is the land, pre-eminently, of spring; its tints even in summer are spring-like, owing perhaps to its wealth of grey olives; it has a certain reserve; it is like a silver-point drawing, of infinite delicacy and pale ethereal hues.

It was very still up there. A donkey passing down the narrow path with a *bigoncia* full

of grapes slung on either side of him; a girl sitting in the shadow of a stucco shrine knitting a coarse red stocking, while her sheep grazed near; an old man going homewards with a bundle of faggots gathered in the woods; a peasant hoeing in the terraced fields among the olives, or digging with the primitive, long-handled, triangular-bladed spade which still prevails in Tuscany—these were the only figures in that upland world.

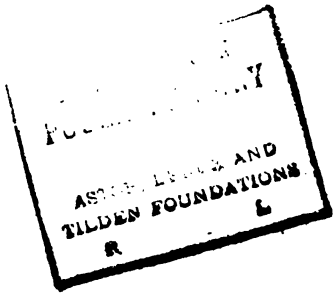
By-and-by we came upon a little farm in a fold of the hills; and the *contadina*, an old friend of mine and Bianca Maria's, begged us to go in and *rinfrescarsi*, and visit the *stalla* and the calf—this invitation being cordially repeated by the husband, an ugly but sympathetic person, who received in his baptism the classic name of "Ovidio."

It is amusing to note that the peasant seldom invites you into his *house*, but usually says first, "Vuol passare nella stalla?" evidently thinking that the height of hospitality and entertainment lies in showing the beasts, which he usually values more highly than his family, since "It is they, Signorina, that earn us the bread!"

At the moment of our arrival the eldest son, a boy of sixteen, was just, to his immense pride, being trusted to drive the ox-cart, filled with

Photo. G. R. Ballance.

A TUSCAN OX-CART.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empty vats, down to the *fattoria*, and receiving many cautions from his parents as to his behaviour on the way. It is true that the oxen knew their way down as well as Gino himself, once their eight legs were set in the road, but none the less he drove them with much pomp and circumstance, shouting, gesticulating, slashing this way and that with his whip, and feeling himself for the first time fairly a man.

We went to the stable to visit the new calf when Gino was safely started, and found the poor little thing in odd company; for at first he had been so lonely and cried so bitterly while his mother was out at her work in the fields, that they had tried the experiment of keeping a kind, motherly sheep back from the rest of the flock, and the calf appeared to find immense comfort in this companionship in a world where he had felt himself very lonely and forlorn. He was a quaint-looking little creature, covered with pinkish hair, like all his brethren in their youth; but after six or seven weeks this rubs off, and the milky white coat, which is to be theirs for the rest of their life, shows underneath.

Of course after visiting the stable we had to go into the house and refresh ourselves, for the Tuscan peasant usually manifests a

primitive hospitality, an eagerness to offer his best, which might put many society folk to shame.

The old house was built on the rocky hill-crest; the stable and lower rooms for the storage of tools, corn, and such things having the floor and part of the walls shaped from the solid rock. On one corner of the building a stone coat of arms bore witness to days of greater dignity, when this had been more than a peasant's dwelling. Close by stood golden haystacks of the peculiar Tuscan form, built around a central pole, on the top of which is always set an inverted earthen pot to prevent the water from running down inside. Every stack, too, has its wooden cross stuck in at the top to preserve it from harm, for the Tuscan believes firmly in the efficacy of the sacred emblem, and with a blessed simplicity which we in our northern lands have long since forgotten, sets a cross in the sheaves in his field, at the corners of his piece of land, over the door of his house, and above his bed. We may talk—I have heard English people do so—of the ignorant superstition of such customs; but to raise these little wooden crosses seems to me as beautiful and reasonable a habit, to say the least of it, as to fill one's fields with advertisements of patent pills!

A stone stair led up to a kind of *loggia*, upon which opened the doors of the dwelling-rooms, and, nothing loath, we clambered up. In the *loggia* bunches of grapes were hanging, and sticky figs, oozing with sweet juice, were stuck to dry for the winter on the thorns of branches of *Acacia horrida*, the spiky bush of which tradition says the Crown of Thorns was made.

As Concetta insisted upon showing us the whole house, we passed through various dim rooms, almost empty of furniture. A low bed, a few clothes hung against the wall, perhaps a chest; some small pictures of Madonna and the saints, a rude cross, a sprig of olive blessed by the priest at the bed-head—that was all. The mattresses were stuffed with the dried stalks and leaves of the Indian corn, for the peasant is almost entirely self-sufficing, and his flocks and crops supply him with all the necessaries of life. Even the material for shirts and sheets is woven by the women of the family from hemp which, after spinning, is bleached in the moonlight, in the virtue of which the Tuscan has a touching faith, believing that it gives a special quality which the stuff would otherwise lack.

In the corner of one room a hen was seated patiently on her sixteen eggs; in another,

spread upon a sheet on the bed, looking like pieces of blanket, were laid great squares of *pasta fatta in casa*, ready to be cooked for the evening meal; but always, in spite of the squalor of much of the interior, the windows, deep-set in the massive walls, afforded some lovely view across the quiet olive gardens and the far blue hills.

The old kitchen, where our pilgrimage ended, was a delightfully picturesque place, with stone walls and a ceiling of black beams, from which hung great bunches of the orange cones of the Indian corn and garlands of vivid scarlet and green tomatoes, drying for the winter. There was little furniture—only a table in the centre, a few wooden stools and benches, a cupboard hung against the wall, a wooden bin for flour, and some copper and earthenware vessels of the quaint and lovely shapes which in this blessed land are given to even the most common household things. On the wall hung a small picture of Madonna with a flickering oil-lamp and a bunch of heather before it. Rows of golden *zucche* or pumpkins were ranged on the top of a cupboard for ornament; and here and there Ovidio, who is a devout soul and serves at Mass in the little church every Sunday, had executed sacred monograms and such devices in blue paint upon the walls.

There was a large stone hearth on which some logs were smouldering, and Concetta insisted that we should eat some *polenda*, which, she declared, should be ready in *quattro e quattr' otto;* and even if I had not myself wanted *polenda*, I could not have resisted Bianca Maria's imploring eyes. So down we sat, while Concetta kicked together the logs until a little blaze sprang up and flickered cheerfully; then, opening the old black cupboard, she took out a wedge of yellow *polenda* made of maize flour—the staple food of the peasants—cut it in slices with a string, and laid them on a grid above the fire; and then, while we sat and watched them toast, she went on to spread a coarse but clean napkin on the table, to cut hunches of dark bread with the small sickle which she carried thrust through her belt, and to bring out her flask of wine.

It was a quaint and picturesque scene: the old kitchen, lighted by the evening sun which streamed in through the small window, the casement of which framed so wonderful a view; Bianca Maria sitting on a stool in front of the fire, playing with a kitten; Concetta, with an orange scarf tied over her dark hair, bustling to and fro.

"How is Ovidio keeping?" I asked pre-

sently; for Ovidio had been nearly at death's door not many months ago, and had returned from it only by a miracle, considering what his behaviour on that occasion had been. As he was dying of inflammation of the lungs the doctor not unreasonably ordered him to keep warm and drink no wine. Ovidio, however, was not used to such precautions; they seemed to him trivial and unnecessary; he not only drank red wine when he thought fit, but got up out of bed on a cold day and went to the window in his shirt to pronounce judgment upon a new litter of pigs—and yet recovered! So really it is little wonder if the doctors think it is useless to call them in such cases, or to so hardy a race!

"Ovidio for now stays well, thanks to the good God," responded Ovidio's wife tranquilly. "It was a fever very strong while it lasted; but I begged from the priest some oil out of the lamp of Madonna in the church to rub him with, and that healed him." And she crossed herself between the cutting of two slices of bread.

I had heard before of this remedy of oil from the church lamps—indeed I remembered that Bianca Maria's nurse believed firmly that it was to this oil, together with a small picture of the "Madonna di Montenero" under the

pillow, that Bianca Maria owed her recovery from an almost hopeless attack of croup, so I realised that it was useless to put in a plea for the doctor's share in the affair.

"And how is Santina?" I inquired; Santina being a widowed sister-in-law who had forsaken the peasant life and hired herself out as a servant in Arezzo.

Concetta shrugged her shoulders. "Ah, Signorina, it is ever the same story; Santina finds never the shoe which fits her well! When I saw her go to Mass with her varnished boots I said to myself that no good should ever come of such doings. Why, I go to Mass in these—in these very ones, Signorina," and she extended a large foot, clad in a clumping shoe. "Figure to yourself," she continued with some asperity, "that that imbecile had found a *padrona*, but a *padrona* very distinguished, who gave her *conpanatico* and twelve francs (10s.) a month; and Santina says that she finds not herself well there, and nothing will do but she must seek herself another place. *Che sciocca!*" and Concetta turned her *polenda* impatiently on the hearth.

"What does it mean by *conpanatico?*" I questioned. "Do they not give Santina her food?"

"All but the bread, Lustrissima" (it is a

quaint omission of a syllable which causes the peasant to address one as "lustrous" instead of "illustrious," thereby recalling the scriptural provision of "oil to make his face to shine!") —"that she must find for herself; it is so in many of the noble families. The *famiglia* must buy its own bread."

The *famiglia!* I like that pretty custom of speaking of Tuscan servants as "the family"; for should there not be some such feeling between those who live beneath the same roof, between master and man, mistress and maid?

"I was looking at the shrine as I came up, Concetta," I observed, ready to change what seemed to be a painful subject—the iniquities of Santina; "and I noticed that there was a figure less than there used to be. What has become of it?"

"Oh, fancy the Signorina noticing that!" exclaimed Concetta in some amusement. "Why, a pedlar came along one day and we sold him the 'Padre Eterno' because we liked him less than the rest. The 'Madonna Santissima' we couldn't get along without, and I should have missed the 'Gesulino'; so, as Ovidio needed some new boots and the money would buy them, we let the other go."

I fairly gasped. The airy fashion in which Concetta stated that they had sold God the Father because they cared little for Him was something of a shock, even knowing so well as I did that the affections of the Tuscan peasant centre in "Maria Vergine," with a certain, but less enthusiastic, devotion to her Son. It reminded me of a little Italian friend of mine who, gazing up at a picture of the Virgin and Child, was overheard to say, "Dear Madonnina, I love you very much, but I love the little Jesus better, because He was a man!" Both showed an equal candour and simplicity in revealing the real feelings of their hearts!

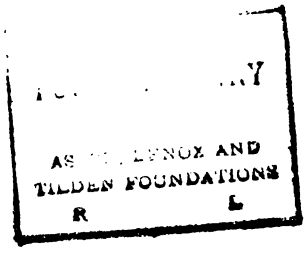
Certainly Concetta's candid avowal was rather surprising. It indicated a familiarity, a favouritism, not to be met with every day. Yet she intended no irreverence; it was a simple statement of a simple fact; it proved afresh how firmly the thought of a mother-goddess is rooted in the people's hearts. Indeed, I wonder sometimes as I watch the Italians appealing to this most pitiful Mother, how we get along in England without Madonna; no other country seems able to do so, and it is a mystery how, having once loved her, we have been able so completely to cast her out.

At last, having done justice to the offered refreshments, we set out on our homeward journey, burdened not only with our blackberries but with a gift, somewhat inconvenient to carry, of a large *torta* or tart. This tart, made by rolling out a piece of bread-dough with oil, adding fresh grapes instead of raisins, and baking the whole in the oven, Concetta produced a little shyly. She had, she explained, made it that morning, thinking that if she sent it down to the palazzo it might please the illustrious ones as a specimen of what "we others" eat; and when I thanked her, she answered deprecatingly that it was only "peasant's stuff," but that she had made it as well as she knew how—with a certain bashful pride. Indeed, seeing that her first gift had given satisfaction, she wished to press upon me, in addition, a sheep's-milk cheese, for the making of which she is famous; but so many presents I could not, even at the risk of wounding her feelings, accept!

This milk cheese is quite a speciality of the Tuscan peasants, being made by slightly warming the milk, adding a mixture of rennet and the beard of the wild artichoke, and, four hours later, when the milk is set, laying it on a sloping stand of wicker and working it gently with the hands—a light hand for this ultimate

HARVESTING FIGS ON A TUSCAN FARM.

Photo. Talfourd Padgett.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kneading being a gift of heaven only bestowed upon a few.

The sinking sun was sending a blaze of golden light against the farm and ricks and hillside as we waved our farewells to Concetta, a picturesque figure in her short petticoat and orange kerchief, standing upon the old stone steps. Really, I could have envied her her home as I looked back at it, and I pitied her for not knowing better what a fortunate woman she was. There was no doubt that she was entirely blind to her blessings; she would doubtless much have preferred a brand-new house to her ancient weather-beaten farm; and as for that pensive landscape with its dim memories, its mysterious melancholy, I am sure she never bestowed a moment's thought upon it from one year's end to another. Yet surely it is a priceless privilege, to be envied by poets, to live in such surroundings; surely here upon these hilltops one might get near to heaven, and learn something of the secret of transcendental things? At least so I thought as we walked home through the twilight by the lonely mountain road. It is too seldom that we, whose artificial lights divide our time artificially, know the mystery of dawn or submit to the majesty of night. Yet there is something very beautiful in the idea of God with-

drawing the sun, as a mother her children's candle, and leaving the world to that sleep which is one of His loveliest gifts. Surely they must be blessed who, like these peasants, living far from the rush of cities, bow before the uprising and down-going sun as our fathers did, and, wearied with healthful work beneath the open heavens, obey the rule of night.

As we went down into the valley shadows enfolded the hills, revealing every curve and moulding, as the black *zendado* of the Venetian women; the mountains cut in sharp black outline against the transparent green of the sky; low above them hung the silver sickle of the crescent moon, while all around lay the soft colour, gold and grey and purple, dull red, faint rose, and peacock blue, of the dying day. It was very silent, very lonely; a profound peace rested upon the earth.

Ah, what an inestimable blessing is that of silence and solitude! how great the relief of hearing no foolish nor bitter nor angry voices, but only the bird-songs, the music of running water, the dirges of the winds! There are some, condemned to live ever in noisy cities, who sigh in vain for this solace; others who would never desire it even if it might be theirs; but those of us to whom life offers from time to time these spaces of quiet, with the soul to

perceive their sweetness, may well be grateful; for in them is the sanctuary of revelation, they soothe as a hand of healing laid on fretted nerves, and—

> "Thro' silence and the trembling stars
> Comes Faith from tracts no feet have trod."

XIII

TUSCAN TREES

Cypresses

To feel the influence and understand the spirit of the cypresses, one must go to Italy, since, although their bodies may grow robust and tall in northern countries, their souls will only speak to the human soul beneath their own profound and tender skies. Trees, like people, are coy and wayward in their moments of self-revelation, and the cypresses in England are alien, unmeaning, whereas in Italy, motionless in the still heat of mid-day, glowing with that gold which the sun interweaves through everything, or sharply defined against the saffron, rose, and green of sunset, they have an appealing force, a poetic significance peculiarly their own.

Their dark, breathless cones give a character to the Tuscan landscape which, with the monotony of the smoke-like olives which clothe its hillsides, it would otherwise assuredly lack.

They have so identified themselves with the land as to become dear to the hearts of all Italian lovers. A cypress, a little wayside

shrine beneath it, a bend of narrow white road, a luminous sky—there is the spirit of Italy as she speaks to her lovers, a scene which, real or pictured, will ever call up visions of solitude and sunset, of a blessed stillness and inviolable peace.

How the old painters loved the cypresses! how they filled those old pictures of the quattro- and cinque-cento with their decorative forms, silhouetted against a transparent blue-green sky!

The cypress is always grave. A mysterious sorrow ever lurks among its dark green branches, even when the sun pours through it or the frolicsome wind tosses its foliage like a plume; just as, whatever they may know of gladness and laughter, an unforgettable sadness lies ever at the heart of poets.

The ancient world felt, as we do, the solemnity of the cypresses, for even the legends by which the old Greeks accounted for its origin are rooted in tears and death. Ovid tells the story of Kyparissos, a young shepherd of the isle of Keos in the Cicladi, who was dearly loved by Apollo for the beauty of his form and face. This luckless youth having accidentally killed a favourite stag one day, desired in his despair to kill himself. Apollo restrained him from fulfilling this tragical intention; but

Kyparissos wept so bitterly that none could comfort him, and by degrees his bloodless limbs were changed to green, and from his forehead, where before the curls had clustered, sprang a tuft of dark green, pushing its point towards the starlit sky.

Another legend tells how the sisters Kyparisse, daughters of Eteocle, fell into the water while dancing, and would have been drowned had the earth not changed them into trees, to which they gave their name.

So it is that, through many generations, the cypresses have been connected with the thought of human sadness, planted as sombre guardians of graves and symbols of death.

The Egyptians used to preserve their mummies in cypress wood; and in some countries it was the custom to hang a bough above the door of a house when Death had entered, and to use the wood as fuel for funeral pyres. The Romans used it for burial caskets, and planted it near the resting-place of the departed; and some of the ancients gave a more sinister and awful meaning to the cypress by dedicating it to Pluto, the lord of Hades, the mysterious and fearful god who ruled the dark world where all who entered must abandon hope.

But the Resurrection of Christ gave a less terrible aspect to death, banishing the old

gloomy spirit; and although Christians continue to associate the cypresses with graveyards, setting them not only beside tombs and in cloisters, but along the roads leading thither, as if the passage through their dark avenues were a fitting prelude to the great requiem of death, they have gained, with the white crosses of hope gleaming beneath them, a new sweetness and peace.

Calm and peaceful they always were, whether Christian or pagan, whether seen beneath the blue of midday, the gold of sunset, or pointing to the solemn starlit sky. The wind whispers through the thick foliage; the sun draws out their aromatic fragrance; the nightingales build in them, and from their topmost spires pour out their hearts to the moon.

The ancients did not, however, limit their use of the cypress to the service of the dead, it played its part also in the life of the living. The Greeks engraved their laws upon its wood; the Latins employed it for their ships; the Romans used it for avenues in their stately parks and gardens, and on the birth of a baby girl a grove of little cypress trees was planted, so that the price of their wood might form her dower on her marriage day. The scent of the cypresses was considered as so health-giving

that the Isle of Cyprus was a favourite resort for wealthy Roman invalids, who believed that by means of the *balsami* of the vast woods on that island they would regain their health; and the oil is still used to preserve fabrics from the ravages of moths.

There seems to be something peculiarly personal about the cypresses. They have a soul by which they speak to the human soul when it is still enough to hold communion with them, and, watched in the profound quiet of evening while the level rays of the setting sun shoot like arrows through the dark foliage, they suggest many thoughts.

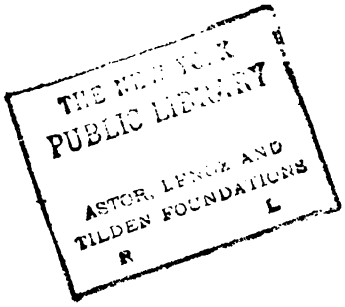
Their gentle spirit dwells in a strong form, for so robust is the growth of the cypress that its trunk can breast and resist the strongest winds, and in Provence the natives plant these trees to defend from the tempest their houses and fields.

It is long-lived, and the sense of its still life, the permanence of its colour—dark, steadfast green, alike in summer and winter—bearing untroubled both burning sun and drenching rain, seems to extend a calming touch upon our hurried, restless life.

The straight dignity of the trunk, the compact form of the solemn spire, wasting no strength in wide-spreading branches, but press-

TUSCAN CYPRESSES.

Photo. G. R Ballance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ing upward as if using all force to reach into the light of God, is a parable for the soul, of concentrated growth towards one point, of impassioned soaring towards one height.

The message of their quiet pointing hands is ever *Sursum corda* ("Lift up your hearts"); and looking up to the profound and sweet sky of Italy, in which we could see, without surprise, even one of those delicate, radiant angels of Perugino become visible, there is but one fitting answer, "We lift them up unto the Lord."

Olives

"And He came out, and went as He was wont, to the Mount of Olives . . . and kneeled down and prayed, saying, 'Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me: nevertheless not My will, but Thine be done.' And there appeared an angel unto Him from heaven strengthening Him. And being in an agony, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground."

Is it the memory of such an infinite sorrow which makes the olives, dreaming upon the hillsides, quiet and pensive, even when they glitter silver in the sun? Did the undersides of their leaves, turned towards the ground,

blanch before an agony so awful, and do the groves pale before the passing of the wind, because it reminds them of the secret known to every olive since that solemn night when the Paschal moon threw white patches between the gnarled trunks of the lonely garden, and a great Passion was won through beneath these trees of Peace? or is it that they weary of preaching their message of peace to a world which does not heed?

No one surely can live long among the Tuscan olives without feeling their mysterious enchantment, the exquisite sadness which is lent by their misty foliage to the land.

They must surely have some kinship with the weeping fraternity of willows—both are so eerie in the darkness, so dreamy and pensive in the light of day. But while the willows know the sadness of a great home-sickness in an alien country, and have borne the burden of the mute harps hung up by those who had no will to sing the "Lord's song" in a strange land, the olives are possessed of a memory more tremendous in its awe and mystery, for in their shadow was accepted the cup of a whole world's sin and sorrow, beneath them He who was Perfect Man, with all man's capacity for suffering, lay crushed to the earth under the weight of a whole world's sin.

To some, the olive slopes are strange and monotonous. They are never so to me; and one of my country joys in Tuscany is to sit on a grassy bank of the terraced *podere* beneath the olives, and look up through the delicate tracery of their narrow, pointed leaves to the soft illimitable blue. The beauty of their foliage is of infinite tenderness and refinement: they possess the loveliness of dreams; of a visionary world, spiritual and calm; and are suggestive, in their quiet way, of many thoughts.

A pigeon wheeling above them on crisp white wings naturally recalls, in such relation, the day when, after weeks of tossing upon great waters, of weary waiting for the subsiding of the flood, it was a dove with an olive leaf in its beak that brought hope to Noah and his seven companions—for if the dove had found a resting-place for the sole of her small red feet, if the green life of the world had not all perished, was there not hope for them?

The old Hebrews loved the olives, and, with tender imagery, pictured as young branches the children who should gather round the table of the man who feared the Lord; and the Church still carries boughs of olives in procession on Palm Sunday, in memory of the green branches

waved before Christ on His entry into Jerusalem, and as symbols of the good works which the Christian must bring in his hand.

Painters loved it. In an old Annunciation by Simone Martini, Gabriel extends towards the Virgin, not the lily of purity—that is set in a vase beside her—but an olive bough of peace; it is the symbol in those pictures where she is represented as receiving the second Annunciation—of the great Peace of Death; and Botticelli, in his lovely "Pallade," crowned the Goddess of Wisdom, to whom the Greeks dedicated the olive, with a garland of its leaves, and wove it in exquisite tracery about her arms and breast.

But the olive is not only suggestive and symbolic; it has a material value and practical use, for the whole-hearted performance of which it once, together with the vine and fig-tree, refused a proffered crown.

It is in the late autumn that the olive-trees become the centres of interest to their owners; for after the severe pruning, the cutting out of dead wood in the spring, they are left much to their own devices, while between their ranks the plough passes, the sower scatters his seed broadcast, the golden corn ripens and falls beneath their silver foliage, and the grapes are gathered and pressed.

Gradually the hard green berries darken, eagerly watched by the *contadini*, to whom their well-being is of supreme importance; and from late November to January, no storms having injured the crop, men and women are busy gathering; while the children, who begin to be useful almost from their cradle, are set to pick up every precious olive which falls to the ground.

Old Pier Crescenzio, who wrote on agriculture very long ago (since he died in 1320 at the ripe age of eighty), declares in his treatise that olives should be gathered in November, when they begin to colour, either by picking with the hands or gently shaking the trees; and that the best *quality* of oil will be made from the first gathered, although from the later pickings more *quantity* may be obtained.

The oil-making is very picturesque, and usually carried on in a primitive, unhurried way, like all rural affairs in Italy. The Italian peasant, if he works hard, yet works deliberately; and there is something very soothing in this placid hand-labour as compared with the mechanical methods which rule our English fields.

The olives are carried from the *podere* to the *frantojo* (oil-pressing room); the bruised ones, picked up from the ground, are set apart

for later use, and the perfect ones pressed for the best quality of oil.

When, for the first time, I passed in beneath the old doorway, I found myself in a large dim room, crossed at angles by several broad low archways of stone. The atmosphere was warm after the sharp frosty air outside, and the men were working in their shirt-sleeves, with bright woollen scarves twisted about their waists. In the middle of the room stood an immense stone basin, into which olives were poured continally, being crushed to pulp, stone and all, by a mill-wheel which turned within the trough. This wheel was attached to a wooden column rising to the ceiling, and was worked by a patient ox, which, tied to a stout wooden pole projecting from the pillar, trod round and round the basin in a track of dead leaves and fern.

The pulp was then taken out with wooden shovels, and emptied into round shallow baskets made of twisted cord, with a hole top and bottom which can be closed with a draw-string when the basket is full. These were carried to a press in another corner of the room and piled top on top beneath it. The machine was primitive in form, as the screw by means of which the baskets were pressed was turned by a projecting beam of wood against which the men threw their whole weight, toiling round

and round until not a drop more oil could be extracted. From the hot, red faces of Orlando and Pietro and the rest of them, this was evidently quite the hardest part of the work.

The press was then unscrewed, the contents of the basket emptied back into the mill, reground, and then pressed again, to obtain a second quality of oil. The remaining pulp, dark and gritty, Orlando explained to me, was called "*salsa*," and generally sold to factories to be made into machine oil, with a mixture of sulphuric acid, or to serve in the manufacture of soap.

The finest quality of the oil was of a pure, limpid gold, and, the water which the olives naturally contain having been skimmed off the top, it was carried away in small wooden barrels and emptied into *conche* (huge terra-cotta pots, glazed inside). The *chiaratojo* (oil-clearing room), where these are stored, must be kept always at an even temperature, as the oil thickens if frozen, and this, though not affecting the flavour, spoils the appearance.

Italians boast much of their oil—which they generally use for cooking instead of butter—declaring that what reaches England is hardly fit to be called olive oil at all; and this is easy to be believed, as it is hard to get it pure even

in Florence, so soon does the work of adulteration begin.

It used to be the curious and characteristic custom in Florence, on the Octave of Easter Sunday, known as the "Domenica in Albis," to make a solemn offering of oil in the Church of the Santissima Annunziata, as a thank-offering for the crop. A representative church or brotherhood made the offering and went in procession, with two half-barrels of oil slung across a mule covered with a bright cloth, on which, dressed as an angel, sat a little boy of three or four years old.

No wonder the Italians set such store by their olives, for the uses of oil are immumerable, and have been since ancient days.

Pier Vettori, who wrote his "Praise of the Olive" in the sixteenth century, describes it as one of the necessities of the Roman bath, by referring to an ancient sculpture in which a servant holds in his hands a vase of oil which he pours drop by drop on his master's shoulders; while the same Florentine writer tells the quaint answer of one who, asked how he had remained, even in extreme old age, both healthy and prosperous, replied, "Inside, with apples; outside, with oil!"

Soldiers, in cold countries and seasons, used, before fighting, to anoint themselves for

warmth; the Greek athletes rubbed oil on their limbs to make them supple; and we know that in very ancient times it was used medicinally—for did not the Good Samaritan perform his healing work on the bruises and wounds of the wayfarer by pouring in oil and wine?

It has also a religious significance. Newly baptized babies are touched with holy oil; the brows of those to be confirmed, ordained, or crowned are signed with it; it is used for the unction of the sick, for the consecration of buildings and bells for the service of God; it burns in dim sanctuaries before the crucifix and the figures of the saints.

Since, then, the olives are the trees of light, of healing, and of consecration, is it wonderful that they are serious upon the hillsides, that they are clothed in such austere and tender tints? And though many speak of them as dreary and monotonous, they can never really be so to those who love them, who have once seen them whitening in the wind and heard them whisper peace upon the Tuscan hills.

XIV

A TUSCAN FAIR

"ALL paths lead to London" runs the old saying. Certainly on the morning of a country fair all ways converge towards one centre—the head of each stately ox, the snout of each rebellious and unwilling pig, is turned in the same direction; and horses, donkeys, vehicles of all shapes and sizes loaded with men and merchandise, cattle, *contadini*, hawkers, and beggars, pour in a continual stream along every road.

There is hardly a more animated scene imaginable than a Tuscan fair, for the natural gaiety of the people, their brilliant dresses, ready smiles, vivacious gestures, and unaffected enjoyment of the outing, all add to the *allegria*, and when the sunbeams pour down out of that blue Italian sky which haunts the dreams of travellers, it must indeed be a sad heart which does not rejoice.

It was yet early on an October morning when we set out for the fair at the Impruneta which, held annually on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in the week of St. Luke's

feast, is one of the oldest and most famous in Tuscany, and one to which an immense concourse of people has always gathered since ancient times.

The Impruneta is itself an interesting little place, renowned for its Black Madonna, a miracle picture which is only allowed to gladden the eyes of the faithful once in five-and-twenty years; and for its potteries, where jars and vases in thick earthenware are made, of every size and shape.

Two hours' cross-country drive lay before us as the carriage turned out between the high mossy pillars which guard the Villa gates. Heavy rain had fallen in the night; the olives which bordered the road gleamed ghostly from a shroud of silvery haze, and the landscape looked mysterious and unsubstantial through the "pale frail mist"; but the sun, rising higher and striking its arrows aslant the pearly vapours, awoke all the colours which burn in the heart of an opal, and as its power increased the fog cleared, leaving pure blue sky.

The country was radiant in the freshness of the autumn morning, the sun lending glory to the gold and bronze of the vine leaves, and touching into fierier tints the scarlet and orange of the bare willow branches, and the hips-and-haws and clusters of pyracanthus berries along

the road. The river Greve reflected a fairy-world of grassy slopes and shimmering foliage in the opaque green of the water; everywhere the pink autumnal roses pushed their shy, sweet faces over the grey stone walls.

At that early hour the roads were dotted with groups of children on their way to school, dressed in the sensible Italian fashion: little girls in black pinafores, brightened with coloured braid, with their uncovered hair arranged in tiny plaits; little boys in dark blue linen overalls, and every child bearing his name emblazoned in crewels upon his breast, so that the school-teacher, seeing his class in line before him, can never mistake Fiore for Gigi, nor Santina for Maria.

At last our long lane opened out upon the tram-line which runs between Florence and Greve, the chief town of the Chianti district, and we passed by the great Certosa in Val d' Ema, begun in 1341 by Niccolo Acciauoli, who, first commoner thus honoured, was presented—perhaps for his services to "Holy Church"—with the Golden Rose by Innocent IV.

As the road wound up a long and gradual slope there appeared, high upon its hilltop, the village of Montebuoni, the original eyrie of that fierce brood of the Buondelmonti, whose loves and hates worked such ruin in the city

below. Up these slopes the Florentines marched in 1137, and, having seized and destroyed the castle, made a compact with its owners that they should go down and dwell as law-abiding citizens within the walls of Florence. These "good men of the mountain" brought with them, however, not peace but a sword, and with their love-affairs and their factions, their turbulence and strife, caused the streets of the city to run with blood, so that matters would hardly have been worse if they had been left on their mountain-top to harry travellers who came that way. Of young Buondelmonte, the gay gallant whose unfortunate love-match with Fina dei Donati and broken contract with the daughter of the Amidei led to his assassination on the old bridge by the latter's incensed relations, and brought the apple of discord into the city, Dante wrote:—

> "O Buondelmonte! What ill counselling
> Prevail'd on thee to break the plighted bond?
> Many, who now are weeping, would rejoice
> Had God to Ema given thee, the first time
> Thou near our city camest."

Ah, well, there are many "might-have-beens" in this world, and if young Buondelmonte had been drowned in the Ema, and the Florentines had not fallen out over that jilting

of the Amidei girl, they would soon, considering their natural tendencies, have been at each other's throats about something else; so it is hardly fair to lay so much on the shoulders of a young man who, instead of taking a plain girl for policy, preferred to wed a pretty one for love.

Emerging upon the main road, we went on in cheerful company, for the way was thronged with as motley a crowd of pilgrims as ever made their way to Canterbury, all journeying, like ourselves, towards the fair.

There were brake-loads of respectable burghers with their wives and daughters; parties of tourists, armed with cameras and eager for experiences and impressions; priests with the inevitable round silk hat and long cassock, revealing solid ankles grafted abruptly into buckled shoes; small carts jogging along with an old horse, being taken up for sale, ambling at the side; knots of country folk who had trudged over miles of hilly road from distant farms among the vines and olives; dignified and unhurried oxen, gay with red ribbons on head and tail—not only for decoration, but to ward off the evil eye; pedlars and hawkers hastening along with portable stalls under their arms; old men and women toiling feebly up with a bunch of air-balloons, a tray of card-

board puppets or gaily-coloured sweets, to try their fortunes at the fair. Beggars abounded, as everywhere in Italy, and many, laid by the roadside, displayed horrible sores and deformities, clamouring loudly and piteously for alms.

Every fair has a picturesqueness of its own, and it was a gay scene upon which we looked down from the top of the last hill, before plunging into the crowd. All the roads leading to the piazza were packed with brakes, wagons of blue and scarlet, carriages and carts, standing "at ease" with their shafts in the air; the moving crowds and bright colours suggested patches of flowers blown to and fro in the wind, and a noise and bustle like the humming of a swarm of bees arose from the busy square.

The fair was held in a great sloping piazza in front of the church, the lower level being reserved for booths of varied merchandise, the higher for cattle, while another square behind the church was devoted to cooking stalls, where the roasting of pork and rows of fowls over hot embers was going on in the open air, and tables were prepared for the accommodation of those who wished to eat with more ceremony than the adjoining hillside could afford.

We had no sooner alighted than Bianca

Maria announced her desire to buy a pig—a pig who should, as she expressed it in her imperfect English, "fat well" for the next Carnival, and for whom she had already conditionally selected a name. Should he be stout he was to be "Cosimo"—a fat, comfortable sounding word; but if he had a "lean and hungry look" he was to be dubbed "Piero" (though in this latter case I think "Cassius" would have been a better choice). Accordingly, accompanied by the factor, who in such matters has understanding for his kinswoman, we turned our steps towards the place where loud squealing announced to those who were far off as well as to those who were nigh, that young porkers were for sale.

The men in charge obligingly hauled out the most promising by the hind-legs, and pulled their tails vigorously, which seems to the initiated to afford some mysterious proof of the pig's worth, though to our inexperience the only result was a piercing wail.

Salvatore was, however, somewhat chilling on the subject of this new inmate for the *fattoria*, and bargained with little enthusiasm; so as prices were high and we felt that without his hearty co-operation we could not hope to "fat" a pig successfully, we momentarily relinquished the idea of leading home the pro-

spective Cosimo or Piero, and turned our attention to the other beasts.

Hundreds of oxen were drawn up in line: stately white ones, more than a man's height, with scarlet sashes around their ample waists, and among them one truly magnificent creature of a pleasant cinnamon tint, who, decked with red and gold tassels, was considered the champion of the fair. There were fascinating pairs of calves, matched to grow into noble yokefellows; *maremmani*, with huge bodies set on short, inadequate-looking legs, which gave them the appearance of antediluvian beasts; tiny white calves with moist pink noses, nestling close to their mothers' sides, and turning pathetic, startled eyes upon the loud-voiced men who gathered to discuss their points.

All the peasants for miles round were there, resplendent in their best clothes, cheery and garrulous, and exultant over the brightness of the weather and the excitement of the fair; arguing, chattering, handling animals, discussing prices, greeting each other noisily, parting with laughter and jokes. Among them was the sprightly Orlando, magnificent in a soft hat of a turquoise blue felt, a coloured waistcoat, pink shirt and ribbon necktie with a gay pattern of crimson roses and emerald leaves. A silver chain with some large *portafortune* was arranged

gracefully across the waistcoat, and his face as he saluted us was wreathed in smiles.

The Bachicche brothers, old friends of mine, were there also—that is to say, the two elder; for Paradiso, whose life is bound up in flocks and herds, was unable to leave his seventy sheep alone in the wilderness. But a shepherd's is, according to Touchstone, "a good life . . . in respect that it is solitary . . . and in the fields"; so perhaps Paradiso has a "vocation" for the pastoral career, and did not envy the more riotous pleasures of the fair.

The Bachicche were less elegant than Orlando—indeed they were somewhat clownish in appearance, with their shabby clothes, clumping shoes, and heavy sticks; but their shrewd faces and reverence for their betters mark them out anywhere as survivors of the good old school. Report speaks goldenly of their agricultural powers, and they are treasures to their *padrone*, as their *podere* yields more than any other on the estate.

They had just, with the counsel of all their friends and acquaintance, been buying a calf to "fat" for next season, having first, doubtless, cast an appraising eye upon every calf in the fair, and were gazing proudly at their new possession, while from under their arms protruded long bars of bread, the provision for

their frugal meal. I wondered if, in honour of the day, they would be tempted to vary their usual dry morsel and indulge in *conpanatico* (something to eat with the bread), but remembering that, when the vines are loaded with grapes, they never taste even a berry, and would almost as soon cut off their hands as cut off a whole bunch, I think there was little chance that they would be tempted by sausage, pork, or cheese.

The piazza where the beasts were gathered was crowded with excited dealers and buyers, loud with the lowing of cattle and the babel of many tongues.

Droves of unbroken colts, brought up from Sardinia or the Maremma, were grouped together, wild and scared, while the dealers from time to time, with a skilfully cast lasso, roped and drew one out, clearing a space to show off his paces—a dangerous proceeding, as in the wild plunging of the startled beast his hoofs were apt to strike unpleasantly near the spectators' heads.

Bony old horses, with weary, dejected expressions, were tied in rows, looking, with their dull eyes and drooping knees, as if life had shown them little kindness in the past, and they had small hope that it would do so in the future. Crowds of donkeys huddled together,

their heads resting upon each other's backs—some sedate and elderly, others, sturdy little fellows, with plenty of work and spirit in them (not omitting the spirit of obstinacy!), while some were soft woolly babies, so small that the men took them up in their arms and laughingly offered them for sale.

There is an immense amount of character to be seen in the beasts at a fair, for every one supports its position with a different expression, some looking subdued and cowed, some sullenly patient, others full of vivacity, with hearts which evidently keep on the "windy side of care." And there is often plenty of pathos, too, in the circumstances which bring them together, for some sad story of hard times, bad harvests, illness with its attendant expenses, death and the breaking up of the old home, may underlie the sale of the stately ox in his tinsel trappings, the poor old donkey, or the gaunt charger groomed up to look his pitiful best. There are some sad partings on the fair ground as the bony mare—old friend of the family—or the young calf, on whose growth such hopes were built, is led off by the new master, and empty stables at night, which make as great a break in the peasant circles as any "vacant chair."

But, in spite of the underlying pathos, the

superficial aspect of the fair was delightfully vivacious. Everywhere there was hilarious greetings, cheery laughter, good-humoured raillery, eager bargaining; and over this latter, where diverse interests were at stake and every point sharply contested, it was by no means rare that the opposing parties, beginning with the "Retort courteous," ran swiftly through the intermediate stages to the "Lie direct."

On the whole, however, the crowd was good-humoured and cheery, for the Tuscan peasant is—at least in my opinion—one of the most agreeable men on the face of the earth; and if he waxes a little warm over his bargains, having a fine contempt for the man who cannot guard his own interests—well, it is all the more amusing for the lookers-on.

There are few more diverting sights—to all not personally concerned—than the *contratti*, and every beast which is being bought and sold becomes a centre of interest, around which gather a group of spectators, who, though casual observers, having no vital interest in the matter, show a burning interest in the terms on which the bargain is made.

There is a definite ritual in these matters.

When one man wishes to sell a calf and another desires to buy it, they together seek out an official known as a *sensali*, who directs

the transaction and balances the price asked and offer made until he brings the contracting parties to terms. Then, taking a hand of each, he puts them together, and when they shake with one another warmly the bargain is made and the *sensali* gets a fee.

Naturally a vast amount of arguing and withdrawing and conceding goes on before this happy consummation is arrived at, and many amusing scenes take place.

The *sensali* who was the centre of one group was a little old man with a florid, jovial face, but a certain cunning in his twinkling eyes, which were shaded by a hat of sage green felt.

This acute person had got the hands of his clients firmly together, but the sacramental shaking had not yet begun, and at the critical moment which should ratify the bargain, the seller, who had grown extremely restive, tried to withdraw, loudly protesting, in spite of the *sensali's* honied words that he would lose a hundred francs on the bargain, "E questo, per Bacco, non mi conviene!" In fact, he finally broke loose altogether, whereupon the *sensali*, seeing hopes of his fee vanishing, flung his arms around the other's neck and began whispering in his ear, probably counselling some concession, while the ring of onlookers, although quite unconcerned, were full of eager partisan-

ship for the one or disparagement of the other, according to the prompting of their sympathies. Here an approving ejaculation of *Già, già!* there a murmur of dissent, an indignant *Diamine!* or a petulant *Chè, chè!* testified to the lively interest taken; and although it meant nothing to their own pockets, they were none the less alive to the gravity of the matter and anxious that business should be done.

How the matter ended I do not know, but probably either buyer or seller—perhaps both—remained dissatisfied and complaining of sharp practice; or perhaps negotiations were broken off altogether, and the *sensali*, for all his astuteness, failed to pocket his fee.

I should like to have seen the Bachicche bargaining for their *vitellino*. Assuredly they are too shrewd to be imposed upon, and I should imagine from the complacent expression of their faces that they had managed the affair well.

Leaving the *sensali* still folded in a brotherly embrace, we made our way through the crowd, avoiding the hoofs of the mules—most vicious of beasts—dodging under the noses of oxen; rounding baskets of outraged turkeys, gobbling in impotent fury; hurrying past the aggrieved hens, who made their presence known by petulant clucking; and the garrulous ducks, pro-

claiming their wrongs from the depths of hampers, to the lower piazza, where every kind of merchandise was exposed for sale on hand-barrows and stalls.

There was a large supply of the pottery, for which the Impruneta is famous, glazed and unglazed, in every size and shape, from small pipkins and *scaldini* to immense vases for lemon and orange trees, and oil jars which seemed incomplete without the bobbing head of one of the Forty Thieves. There were cheap materials of every kind, and of the most vivacious patterns and tints to tempt the peasant girls—brilliant handkerchiefs; *fasce* or swaddling bands for babies, with "Idolo mio," "Delizia," and other suitable inscriptions interwoven; felt hats, pocket-knives; hand-made lace, the work of the country women; glittering imitation jewellery and strings of coral, suitable for rustic swains to offer to their betrothed, since "doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat"; *zoccoli* and great boots of Vacchetta, or undressed calf-skin; sweetmeats and dancing-men to take home to the *bimbi;* piles of *brigidini* (a thin aniseed biscuit stamped between two hot irons, which is a speciality of Tuscan fairs); piemen, with wares "as dry as the remaining biscuit after a voyage," lying in

Photo. Talfourd Padgett.

AT THE POT FAIR

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wait for Simple Simons, and furnaces where a roaring trade was being done in *bruciati*, or roasted chestnuts.

Merry-go-rounds with gallantly prancing steeds whirled on their giddy way, to a monotonously cheerful tune; a "valiant piece of dust," who described himself as the "strong man," performed feats with iron bars and balls in the midst of a gaping crowd; a fortune-teller, a stout, elderly woman with large gold earrings, sat on a raised chair, displaying under her short woollen shirt a pair of ample feet, while to the ring of spectators—chiefly young girls—gathered around her, she disclosed the secrets of the future with a pack of dirty cards.

She was perhaps one of the *streghe*, or wise women, in whom the country folk still believe, but a certain sameness characterised the fortunes of these damsels; difficulties which would be overcome, calumnies which would be refuted, and finally, as a reward of triumphant virtue, a husband and eight or ten children—"Bella cosa, davvero!"

It is curious how at a fair one ardently desires things which one would never dream of coveting at other times, and feels a passionate curiosity about sights on which, as a rule, one would not bestow a passing glance.

Bianca Maria's heart was set upon a rose-coloured man of jointed cardboard, with an entirely insufficient purple costume, who danced on strings, and cost a halfpenny, and she was with difficulty led away from the stall which boasted his presence, together with a crowd of his brethren; while for twopence I bought a massive clasp-knife with carved wooden handle, which has been one of my treasures ever since.

We made many purchases, with the faithful Salvatore to bargain, since, though the stall-holders greeted us with extravagant politeness, they did not scruple to ask us two or three times the just price of every article which we wished to buy.

We approached a small man of mature age, busy behind a pile of *brigidini*, and gave an order for a kilo, to which Salvatore, who knows human nature, added the stern injunction, "And see that you give the Signorine fair weight!" This venerable person, who would have been better employed in thinking of his latter end than in cheating his customers, appealed to all the saints to bear witness to his honesty, praying that he might lose his remaining eye before the feast of Ogni Santi if his dealings were not as clear as the noonday light; but I hope for his sake that his prayer was unheeded,

as he cunningly contrived to tilt a good proportion of the biscuits back into his own stock as he transferred them from the scales to the clean handkerchief which Salvatore unfolded to receive them, and appeared wounded in his tenderest feelings when we called attention to the fact.

Close by this unprincipled old gentleman was a shoemaker—a little man, with one tuft of hair standing bolt upright on his bald head —brooding over his wares, fussily arranging and rearranging them, as if even to touch them were a pleasure; and as I, who can never resist boots, felt a sudden desire born in me for a pair of hobnailed ones of untanned leather such as the peasants wear, we entered into conversation with the owner on the respective merits of two equally attractive pairs.

"They look to me the same," I declared, with a boot in either hand.

"The difference is indeed small, most illustrious," rejoined the courteous disciple of St. Crispin. "*These*" (pointing to one pair) "are of a calf who has drunk only milk, while these" (with an emphatic tap upon the others) "have also eaten grass. *I*, Signorina, should recommend those which have eaten grass!" So, impressed by this finely drawn distinction the bargain was made, and I go out to tramp the

country roads and hunt evasive mushrooms, shod with the skin of the herb-eating calf.

Not far off was a lottery, the object set up being that dream of the *contadino*, a *sveglia*, or alarum-clock.

To possess a *sveglia* is indeed to be blessed above other men, and this was an especially desirable one, set in a gilded horseshoe and mounted upon a stand of emerald-green plush. One simple soul, who had evidently decided to stake his best hopes on it, was spending his coppers recklessly in tickets for the coveted object, which, sad to relate, fell to another's lot, and it was pitiful to see how his face fell as he turned away, while the fortunate winner was surrounded by an eager crowd of friends, anxious to examine the face, the stand, the works of the wonderful alarum, and if possible to hear it strike.

As one watches the gay moving throng, the booths, the beasts, the varied merchandise in the great piazza, it is interesting to remember how many times the crowd must have gathered in this same old square, under the shadow of the ancient church, surrounded by the same hills — not the same buildings, as to-day. How like it must have been year by year for centuries! It is true that those keen-faced old Florentines who used to haunt it are long since

numbered with the great majority. They are gone, the sturdy burghers, the gay young cavaliers with their "swashing and martial outside"; the knights, courtiers, pages, men-at-arms; the merchants with woollen stuffs from the Calimara, and silk from Por Santa Maria; the astute dealers on the lookout for skins to carry back to the *pelliceria;* the artists, great ladies, stout country wenches, friars, apothecaries, jugglers, minstrels, charlatans; gone, the quaint costumes—the dignified *lucco*, the flowing *zimarra* and silver garland, the parti-coloured hose. But the changes are only superficial, the vital part of the old fair remains.

There are still herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, still keen faces intent on a good investment, still courting and quarrelling, buying and selling, laughter and pranks. One may still, though the dress be modern, find rogues and rustics, beggars and burghers; for though centuries pass, men's interests and men's hearts change vitally little, if superficially much; and long may the heart of the Italian peasant continue unchanged if it prompt him to do his business so picturesquely, to take his pleasure so joyously, as in the gay circle of a Tuscan fair!

XV

A TUSCAN MARRIAGE

A *sposalizio* is an event which appeals to almost every one, even when not bound by close ties of affection to either bride or bridegroom, and this is perhaps partly because it arouses our curiosity and quickens our pulses a little when we consider what infinite possibilities of sadness and gladness, what far-reaching causes are set in motion by that simple giving and receiving of a ring. I do not know, however, that it was any very profound speculations as to the ultimate issue of the matter, but only a friendly interest in the doings of our neighbours, which caused Bianca Maria and me to be so much excited when we learned that the morrow was fixed as Biondina's wedding day.

Biondina is a pretty peasant girl, blue-eyed and golden-haired, whence the name by which we knew her; for her godfathers and godmothers in her baptism named her Caterina, and she is only called "the fair" from the colour of her hair and skin.

It would have been a grief to us both, and

especially to Bianca Maria, to have missed the wedding; but this misfortune was happily avoided by our arriving at the Villa for our autumn sojourn on the very day before. The news soon reached us; indeed, as we strolled up the quiet road between the olives in the afternoon sunshine, we met Biondina coming along, blushing and bashful, escorted by her mother, to bring the pair of fowls which, unless replaced by eggs or pigeons, is the conventional offering to be made to the *padrona* by a bride-elect.

Massima, Biondina's mother, was eager to supply me with all details as to the making of the match, the social status of the young man, the trousseau, and the arrangements of the new home, which she did, sitting on the low stone wall by the roadside, at considerable length.

There had been many *pretendenti* for Caterina, she explained, she being without doubt a brave girl, as well as good to look at; but although many of these suitors had appeared to be not ineligible, who, she demanded, would buy a cat in a sack? It was an affair which needed careful consideration, and she and Leopoldo, her husband, had been busy Sunday after Sunday for weeks in visiting the houses of the various bachelors; finding one dirty,

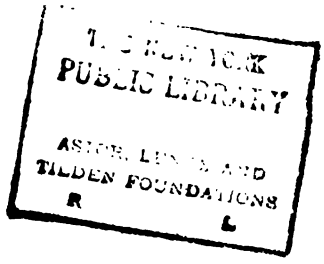
another with a scolding mother-in-law, and so on through the whole number, until at last they had decided in favour of Tito, having discussed the matter fully with that young man's parents "at four eyes," and settled *à la perfezione* all questions about the dowry and the future life.

The young man, Massima admitted, had previously had an admiration for and "made the court" to a girl in a neighbouring village —but a mere dry fig in comparison with Biondina! He had been unable to marry her because his elder brother had a wife, and there was no room for more women in the house; but recently the brother's wife had died, and as her place had to be supplied, the *capoccia* had ordered Tito to "search one" for himself. Tito's thoughts had at first, apparently, turned once more in the direction of the "dry fig" at Greve; but having had pointed out to him the truth of the old proverb, "Donne e buoi dei paesi suoi," he had relinquished the idea of "marrying himself" at a distance, and after once seeing Biondina, had expressed himself ready to take a wife in accordance with his father's wish.

I was not surprised to hear of all these preliminaries before any personal courtship of Caterina, knowing that the customs of olden

Photo. G. R. Ballance

THE QUIET ROAD BETWEEN THE OLIVES.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days, when marriages were arranged entirely between the parents, still prevails to a great extent in all classes of Italian society, although a little more liberty is now allowed; personal preference is more likely to be considered, and the young people permitted to *fare l'amore*—within strict limits—on their own account. In most of the aristocratic families marriages are still arranged by a third person, and finally, when all is settled, the mother of the *sposo* brings him to visit the *sposina*. But even then it is only in the most liberal-minded households that the young people are allowed to see each other in private or to stroll together in the garden — as a rule there is a *chaperone* always present, and the bride has not a moment alone with her fiancé until she is his wife!

In connection with the marriages among the *contadini*, De Gubernatis describes in his *Usi Nuziali* that the would-be bridegroom, or a near male relative, goes to the house of the desired bride, and, knocking at the door, says, "Io vengo a cercare una giovenca bianca e di una bellezza perfetta che voi possedete e che potrebbe fare la gloria del mio gregge e la consolazione dei miei vecchi anni" ("I come to seek a young maiden—literally 'heifer'—fair and of perfect beauty, whom you possess, and who might be the glory of my flock and the

consolation of my old age." The reply is given in language equally patriarchal, and the ceremony is gone through of offering one by one the other women of the house, who are in turn refused, until at last the right one is brought, dragged, apparently by force, towards her *pretendente*, who accepts her at her father's hands, saying, "E quanto io desidero." I do not know if this custom still prevails in some country places, never having personally come across it; but in Tuscany every district has its own usages, peculiar to itself. We know certainly that in olden days there were many quaint ceremonies in connection with a *fidanzamento* among the peasants; and Conti tells us that the annual Lenten Fair outside the Porta Romana was known as the "Fair of the Contracts," because there the weddings were arranged. All the parents of the country round who had marriageable sons and daughters used, he relates, to bring them to this fair, where, after much discussion (and, doubtless, much litigation!) among the old people, some of the young ones would be paired off, according to their parents' inclination, and made to walk at a brisk pace up the long hill which leads from the city gates. This was to enable their elders to judge of them as a couple, and to criticise the girl (scarlet, we may be sure, with

the pull up the hill, the embarrassment of her position, and the jests which the bystanders certainly would not spare!), to consider her build, her staying powers, all her points, in fact, and judge whether she would be a useful inmate of their farmhouse, and an active helpmate for their son.

This open criticism of the future daughter-in-law was not confined, however, to the lower classes, for Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi tells, in her delightful letters, written in the fifteenth century, how, when seeking a wife for her son Filippo, she used to go to Mass at Santa Reparata and sit behind the girls to see how they shaped, for "It is not a matter in which we should take the first thing that comes to hand!" giving all kinds of details as to their conduct and appearance, writing her estimates and criticisms as calmly as if the business in hand had been the purchase of a cow instead of the choosing of a bride!

Of one she says, "It would be a good alliance, and of all that have offered she seems to have the best qualities"; again, "The one from Vernio pleased me, but she is awkward and countrified, they say." "I have heard that a daughter of the Alberti is very beautiful," she writes in another place, "and will try to see her during these festival days, and find out whether

the father would give her to us. . . . We will have a number of them on hand, so that when the time comes we can pick out the best. May God show us the right one!" On another occasion she writes to her son in Naples, "I write to tell you that on Sunday morning when I went to Santa Reparata for the early Mass, as I have gone several mornings to see Adimari's daughter who generally attends that Mass, I found Tanagli's daughter there, and not knowing who she was, placed myself near her and studied her well. It seemed to me that she was beautiful and well made; as large as Caterina [her own daughter], or larger; of good complexion—not one of these pale ones, but as if she was in health. She has a long face, and her features are not very delicate, but not at all ordinary; and it seemed to me by her walk and her whole appearance that she was by no means dull (*addormentata*). In fact, it seemed to me that if her other qualities are satisfactory, she would not be a bad bargain, but an honourable one. I followed her out of church, and saw that she was a Tanagli. The Adimari girl I have never been able to see, she not having been out as usual, and while I was looking for her behold this one came along, who does not generally go to Mass at that hour. I believe God brought her before me that I might look

at her, since I had no idea of seeing her there."

However, after much delay, caused partly by Filippo's indecision and timidity (his mother prayed in vain for some time that he might be delivered from so much fear!), partly because some of those most desired by Alessandra were given to others, and, as she complains bitterly, "Those who have other recommendations are not beautiful . . . and for my part, I don't want to have these frights in my sight, for it is little enough pleasure one gets from having them in the house!" The marriage was settled, the "Adimari girl" being chosen as being the best match they could find.

We can picture a little what must have been the nuptial rites when at last Filippo brought home his Fimametta; for is it not all, or a scene entirely similar, pictured for us in that quaint old painting in the Florentine Academy, representing the "Nozze dei Adimari"?

There we may see Messer Boccaccio Adimari, who had renounced his *canonicato* to marry Lisa or Luisa Ricasoli, on June 22, 1420, accompanied by a number of stately couples with frizzed heads and magnificent garments, walking hand in hand in a "high and disposèd" manner, while the trumpeters of the Signoria blow lustily from the steps of

the *loggia* of the Bigallo, and overhead is stretched an awning to shelter the revellers from the fierceness of the midsummer sun.

It was customary at weddings, as at funerals, to receive the guests in the street outside the houses—all the Via Vigna Nuova was decorated for the marriage-feast held under the *loggia* at the Rucellai-Medici wedding, of which Bernardo Rucellai writes so proudly in his diary—and many an old chronicler and journal-writer helps us to call up before our minds a vivid picture of those ancient feasts.

The sumptuary laws of those days concerned themselves much with the entertainments given at weddings, for in them it was strictly ordered that no unmarried woman should receive pearls or precious stones (which would be hard upon some modern bridesmaids!), and, even when married, might only wear the worth of forty gold florins. It was also prohibited that in their nuptial days the bride and bridegroom should give dinner or supper to more than sixteen women (six of the bride's family, ten of the bridegroom's) besides his mother, sisters, and aunts. Only three musicians and singers were allowed during the feast; two hundred people might be invited to witness the signing of the contract; and even the meats were limited by order, though there was perfect liberty allowed

as to fruits and confections (who does not remember the famous jellies at the wedding described in "Romola"?), and although the bride might, if she wished, go to church on horseback, not more than six women were to attend her on the way.

But that these laws were not observed very strictly we may judge for ourselves when we read that, for the wedding of Gualtieri Panciatichi and Niccolà Guicciardini in May 1507, the provisions included eleven calves, two sheep, thirty-one couples of fowls and turkeys, and sixty-three cheeses, all of which were gifts; and that, in addition, there were purchased a hundred and eighty pairs of ortolans, a hundred and thirteen pairs of pigeons, a hundred and eighty-one couples of poultry, ninety-four brace of quails, seven peacocks, besides seventy-eight barrels of ordinary wine, and a hundred and forty flasks of Trebbiano![1]

Naturally the preparation of all this food kept an army of cooks busy; and, as well as the more solid provisions, there were wonderful figures, palaces, and designs of every kind to be moulded in jelly, butter, sugar, and cheese.

In those olden days it was also the custom to make special bridal plates, bearing the portrait of the bride painted upon them—

[1] *La Famiglia Panciatichi*, by Count Passerini.

not always flattering likenesses, one would imagine, judging by the wry-necked, gaunt-faced Eleonoras and Clorindas who leer at us from their glass-cases in the Arezzo Museum. But the subject of Italian weddings in olden days is too large, too full of delightful details to be treated briefly, and I must return to Massima, whom I left sitting on the wall.

The wedding, she explained, would be at half-past twelve next morning, after the ceremony at the *municipio*, and I was relieved to hear that the civil marriage was to be accomplished on the same day as the religious; for the minds of the peasants are seldom open to conviction, nor do they realise as a rule that new obligations result from the passing of new laws. They cannot understand that in the eyes of the law the religious marriage, which to them is everything, means nothing, and this view is too often supported by the teaching of the priests. Indeed, it sometimes happens that, through no evil intentions, but through economy, and sheer carelessness about a ceremony which to them seems unimportant, a couple will, after their marriage in church, go peacefully home, not ratifying the bond legally for a month, or six, or even more—an unfortunate omission if not rectified before a child is born, as the law recognises the legitimacy of

no children (unless specially acknowledged by the father) whose parents have been married only by that religious ceremony which legally does not bind at all. This twofold marriage may, in fact, bring the ignorant or bigoted into serious trouble, as it affords unscrupulous men an easy means for bigamy, since, having married one woman with a religious marriage, a man is free at any time to marry again according to the law. The children of the second marriage are the legitimate ones, and the first poor wife is left without redress. In olden days, when things were accomplished more easily, a declaration before a priest in the presence of two witnesses was enough to constitute the *fidanzati* man and wife, as we read in the *Promessi Sposi*, where poor Lorenzo's plan so woefully failed. Even now the priests are not very exigeant in the matter, the conscience of the Church being satisfied by the declaration of two witnesses who have known the contracting parties from childhood, that neither has been previously married nor taken the vows as monk or nun. At the municipality, on the contrary, innumerable papers and formalities are essential, and a document must be produced from every city in which either bride or bridegroom has ever lived, to prove that no marriage was contracted there.

Biondina's wedding was the third within a very few years in the same family; but unfortunately these marriages had not been distributed by Providence with that impartiality which is conducive to peace in a domestic circle, and I soon gathered from Massima's story that there was not a little bitterness on the subject in the heart of Biondina's Aunt Maria!

The custom of several married brothers living with their families beneath one roof can hardly fail at times to be provocative of jealousies, especially when, as in this case, each of the three has a daughter of marriageable age.

Of these three girls Giulia was married at eighteen to a promising young peasant, and for a time all seemed going well. But after a few months poor "Beppe" developed a *mal di petto*, the fruits of an illness during his term of military service, and a galloping consumption carried him off before many weeks were past. Giulia was at first inconsolable; but when the first edge of sorrow had worn a little dull, and the consciousness began to return that she was young and very pretty, it chanced that, as she went Sunday by Sunday on a duteous pilgrimage to the Campo Santo to lay flowers on poor Beppe's grave, she met a young

butcher from the neighbouring village, also prematurely widowed and bound upon the same pious errand as herself. For some weeks each attended assiduously to his or her own grave, both being overcome with sorrow for the dear departed one; but gradually the salutations which passed between them became a little warmer, before long they together arranged flowers upon each grassy hillock, and on the day when Giulia's ten months of widowhood were ended (before which time she could not be again married legally) she went down to the *municipio* and took her butcher for better, for worse! They still manifest a praiseworthy zeal and regularity in the visitation of their graves every *festa;* and should either die, the lot of the survivor would probably resemble that of a twice-widowed butler of whom I have been told. This faithful soul was accustomed, year by year as the day of the dead came round, to visit the graves of his two wives in the Campo Santo, carrying flowers and setting lights upon the tombs. It chanced one year that the 2nd of November was a terrible day of wind and drenching rain; but in spite of the elements Giovanni would not neglect his wives. His mistress, sympathising with the poor old man, said to him kindly in the evening, "Well, Giovanni, you must have had a

trying time at the cemetery to-day?" "*Ah, Signora mia*," he replied feelingly, and with much expressive waving of his hands, "you may well say so. *Che affare! accendevo la Virginia, la Vittoria si spengeva! Accendevo la Vittoria, la Virginia si spengeva!* And there was I, running to and fro, lighting first one and then the other, all the afternoon!" Something of the kind will, I imagine, be the duty of Giulia should her devoted Ercole predecease her, or of Ercole should Giulia be the first to go the way of all the children of men!

Giulia is, it must be owned, a "thorn in the eye" to her aunt Maria, the wife of the third of the three Maione brothers and the mother of Dina, for whom, though she has long been in search of an *omino per bene*, she has not yet succeeded in finding one; and it is gall and bitterness to her that Giulia should have had two husbands before she is twenty-one while Dina has not as yet found one at all.

Poor Dina! it must be owned that she is not a *raggio di sole*, nor even very amiable; but I fear it is a sad mortification to her that the long-desired *omino* is not forthcoming, and has been so still more since she knew that Biondina also was to be a bride. Indeed, I saw as much on that evening when, at Massima's earnest invitation, I called with Bianca

Maria to see the wedding finery, and found Dina cutting fodder for the cattle, and Maria, with a somewhat acid expression on her brown face, sitting on the *aia* shelling beans.

"I don't seem to remember Tito," I observed as I took the chair offered to me. "I suppose he was away for his military service when I was last here? Is he a nice-looking young man?"

Massima shrugged her shoulders half-deprecatingly.

"Handsome one cannot say, Signorina; indeed, for the sake of Biondina, I could have wished that he had been more so; but if it pleases the good God he will make none the worse a husband for that."

"Well," interposed Maria with a sniff of disdain, breaking open a bean pod with quite unnecessary violence, "Biondina may be thankful that he has taken her at all, a girl with so small a dowry and without even a pearl necklace! If you and 'Poldo had been less difficult to please you might have married her last year to the postman, who is as handsome as an eye of the sun; but it is ever the same: 'Chi troppo vuole niente ha'"!

"The postman!" cried Massima scornfully; "and a fine husband he would have been for my Biondina—a widower with six children!

No, no, if Tito is not a beauty he is a good youth, and we all know that even the black cows give white milk."

"Well, I hope it may turn out well," observed Maria in a sour tone which proved her wish to be of an entirely different nature. "But," she added maliciously, "it is better not to say four till the nuts are in the sack; and marriage is not as one makes it, but as it afterwards turns out."

This home-thrust (for 'Poldo has not proved all that he might be in domestic life) was prudently ignored by Massima, and she turned the subject by asking if we would not step into the house and see the things which Biondina had been laying out to be admired.

Everything was displayed upon the bed—the household linen, the personal apparel, the gold chain which it is the ambition of every peasant bride to possess, now that the old pearl and garnet jewellery is no longer customary; and close beside stood the *cassone* in which all this gear was, an hour later, to be carried by Biondina's brothers to her future home.

The *cassone* was but a simple one of plain unvarnished wood; yet even so it recalled the lovely old bridal chests upon which great artists did not think it beneath them to paint the Triumphs of Love, and many of which may still

be seen in the Florentine museums and curio shops to-day. It was of these that Savonarola, the stern reformer, wrote to the luxurious and beauty-loving Florentines of his day: "Do not let your daughters prepare their trousseau in chests adorned with pagan paintings. Is it right for a Christian spouse to be familiar with Venus before the Virgin, or with Mars before the Saints?" Yet, in spite of his denunciations, the custom does not seem to have been abandoned, and there is something very touching about these old chests, with their faded gilding, their half-obliterated pictures, their pathetic memories, now that the brides who once stored away their wedding finery with such rosy hopes and expectations have returned long since to dust, and sleep beneath the pavements or in the quiet cloisters of many an ancient church.

I wonder if that "Triumph of Love," which was so favourite a subject for the decoration of wedding-chests, ever seemed something of a mockery to some of those strictly-kept girl-wives, brought early into subjection by their stern husbands after the fashion described by the writer of the *Governo della Famiglia?* And I wonder, too, what was the design upon the chest in which poor Ginevra dei Benci hid, according to tradition, on her wedding-day, never to be found until years afterwards, still

in the remnants of her bridal-gown, still with some trace of her former loveliness and some breath of her favourite perfume lingering about her; while in her hands was clasped the jewel which had been her lover's gift?

Of course we had to admire everything—the linen which Biondina had herself been spinning ever since she was fourteen, the gold chain, the wedding-dress; to offer a thousand good wishes, and to promise to be present at the church next day.

Certainly, if the old saying be true, "Happy the bride the sun shines on," it seemed as if Biondina ought to be very happy, for the sun on that September day blazed down out of a deep blue sky, and all the world was glad.

It was a very simple little procession which passed along the narrow road between the olives and pink roses and the heavy clusters of purpling grapes to the church. First walked the bridal couple, Biondina in the black dress which is the customary costume of a peasant bride—this dress figuring at all future church processions at which it is etiquette for the married women to appear in black. Upon her head was a wonderful and hideous white hat, the pride of her heart, which obscured her charms as far as anything could do, and made me thank Heaven afresh that so few women of

the lower classes in Italy ever wear hats at all. A woman's hat is primarily for ornament, and, if not beautiful, loses all its *raison d'être;* and no one can question which is preferable—the erections of cheap flowers and ribbons which adorn our English country girls, or the black lace veils of the Italian peasants, which add a charm to even the plainest face. Certainly Biondina on her wedding-day looked less picturesque than I had ever before seen her; but it was correct to wear a hat; she was confident that it "stayed her well"; it was the last touch of elegance to be married in one, and therefore a hat she must without fail have.

Beside her walked Tito, who, doubtless an attractive figure in his working hours, with bare feet, coloured shirt, and scarlet woollen scarf twisted about his waist, was on this auspicious day perspiring visibly in a suit of large check cloth, orange boots, an aggressively brilliant necktie and a large felt hat.

It was noticeable that the parents of neither were present, as it is not the custom among the peasants for them to be so, unless there is to be unusual elegance and *lusso;* in all ordinary cases their place is to stay and get things ready at home. Nor were there any young girls there, as it is not etiquette for any peasant girl to attend a wedding until she

attends it as a bride! Biondina's friends and her younger sister had been the day before, according to custom, to prepare her room in the new home, but strict propriety did not allow of their appearing at the ceremony as guests.

Immediately behind the happy couple walked Amedeo, the gardener, who had "combined" the wedding, and who therefore wore —the usual offering in such cases—a shirt made and presented by the bride. I wondered that there had been any spirit left in Amedeo for the arrangement of matches, so complete had been the failure of his last! At the outset everything had gone to perfection. The young man, son of a neighbouring gardener, was described as a "golden cup," so perfect was he; the young woman, daughter of the coachman at another villa, was, according to Amedeo, as a ray of the sun for beauty; and he himself wore his bridal shirt, and made a speech at a sumptuous dinner given by the bride's father at a town restaurant, and was happy, and, if looks were anything to go by, prouder than he had ever been in his life before. But pride in Amedeo's case was but the prelude to a fall. His marriage went forward anything but well; before six months were over the bride was back in her father's

house. Both parties, with all their relatives, bitterly abused Amedeo, and even the respective *padroni* of the two sides espoused the causes—the one of his coachman's family, the other of his gardener's—and ended by falling out violently themselves. In fact, it seemed in every way as if, to quote Amedeo himself, "The devil had put his tail in"; and, as I say, after so great a failure none but a very bold man would have interfered in matrimonial affairs again as long as he lived. Amedeo must, I suppose, be a man of unusual courage, for he looked anything but crestfallen; on the contrary, his whole appearance spoke of self-satisfaction, and he walked with much dignity, only once breaking out of the procession to chastise a small dog which came barking at his heels.

Behind came Giulia with her butcher, following them all the young married relations of both parties; and so the company moved forward towards the church.

There the service proceeded decorously until the crucial moment, when a serious difficulty arose. The ring proved too small for Biondina's well-developed finger; and, as Ercole remarked to me afterwards, it was *proprio una vergogna* for the poor thing. Push this way, push that way, before it would go on!

However, on it went finally; the blessing of the Church was given, and the bridal party wended its way back to the old stone house which was to be Biondina's future home.

On the threshold the bride was welcomed with ceremonious formality by her mother-in-law, and then they all sat down to eat. There was much rejoicing, making of speeches and drinking of toasts, and, happy omen, Ercole upset a glass of wine. Had it been oil, it would have been "another pair of sleeves," but the spilling of wine is believed to bring good luck.

When all is over the bride usually packs a basket of provisions to send home to her mother and sisters, as the women of her family, according to the custom in some parts of Tuscany, are not present at the feast. As a rule she is expected, for the first week or two after her marriage, to be up the first in the morning, to do the cooking, and, in all ways, prove to her new relations that she is a good housewife and a valuable addition to their home; and on the following day the bride and bridegroom together usually appear before the *padrona*, bashful and happy, to offer a box of the *confetti* (hard white sugar-almonds), which for Italians take the place of the English wedding-cake.

"She will be very happy, the Biondina?" questioned Bianca Maria as we walked home through the autumn sunshine. "She is glad that she go to live with Tito, and stay no more at home?"

Well, yes, I hoped so. She looked happy enough under her impossible hat; and the bridegroom's face was radiant, if a little sheepish—so it was to be trusted that the "dry fig" had quite passed from his mind, and that he would prove an excellent husband. But of these things who dare prophesy, for love is a mystery, and if strong as death is also frail as gossamer; and who can tell in the dawn what the hours of the day may bring?

Bianca Maria was in a conversational mood. The wedding—the first she had witnessed—had struck her as a charming and, if possible, to be imitated rite. She takes a profound, if guileless, interest in mankind, and does not for an instant disguise her preference for the stronger sex. "Oh, how it was nice, always in the arms of gentlemen!" was her amazing and unabashed description of a week's stay in a country house where she had been caressed and made much of by many visitors; so I was not surprised when, after a discussion of the day's events, which lasted to the very gates

of the Villa, she concluded emphatically, "In a little time, after two years—or three—also I, I marry myself. Once I had decided myself to be a nun, but now that I want not. I will have a *sposo* and many children (the Biondina has no children!), but my *sposo* will be not like Tito; he will be a prince like that of the Cinderella, and we shall live in a palazzo, and be happy ever after."

My little White Mary! Childish dreams, childish projects!—and yet, who can tell? If Bianca Maria is as engaging at seventeen as she is at seven, I think there will be small doubt as to the appearance on the scene of *pretendenti;* and if the right one be the desired prince, so much the better; and if not —well, there is no "if not"; for once Love touches our eyes it is more than a prince we see—it is the very King of Hearts.

XVI

IN A MERCURY MINE

It was a morning of hot sunshine and deep blue sky. The scarlet geraniums round the terrace wall glowed like flame in the still air. The green huddle of the beechwood was unstirred by any breeze; occasionally, from the hill above the house, floated down the mellow note of a goat's bell as its owner leaped among the rocks.

Half-reluctant I felt on a day so radiant to leave the surface of the earth for its dark interior, yet it had been planned for us to explore the mercury mine, so to the mine we meant to go.

On coming downstairs at ten o'clock, I found Bianca Maria had already made friends with the engineer who was to escort us, and since there chanced to be no one else present to perform the necessary ceremonial, she, at my prompting, introduced us briefly, as who should say, "Alice, Mutton; Mutton, Alice"!

The rest of the party soon gathered, and we set off for the sheds, to which Giovanni

had already been despatched with waterproofs and cloaks.

Now, that Bianca Maria should dream of herself descending the shaft had never occurred to me. I had foolishly assumed her realisation of the fact that the part of a person of her size was to wish us good speed as we embarked on our downward journey, and to welcome us back when, like Persephone, we returned from the lower world. It was therefore an unpleasant awakening when she selected from the pile of wraps the largest of waterproof capes, and desired me to button it for her, "Because Giovanni he tell me that in the *miniera* it rain always."

"But, my sweet one, it is impossible; you are too little—you would be afraid!" I protested, much perturbed, and hardly knowing what arguments were best to employ. "You will stay here and wait for us; you will enjoy that *ever* so much more," I added in tones which should have carried conviction to a very Didimus.

Bianca Maria's face became mutinous.

"To stay here I want not. I go—I, too. You go, and why not also I?"

Vainly I explained that I was quite three times Bianca Maria's age, so that my doings were no standard by which to measure those

of a person of seven, and that decidedly an underground excursion was not, to use the Tuscan saying, bread for Bianca Maria's teeth. In vain I reasoned. If I was resolute, Bianca Maria was more so. "I go—I go—I go!" she cried vehemently; then, stooping to entreaty, "*Why* you make me this displeasure? *Why* you not want that I amuse myself also, I?" and with the tip of one finger she removed a great tear which was coursing down her cheek.

It is one of Bianca Maria's peculiarities that she never cries aloud like other children, but weeps in silence, large dreadful tears rolling slowly down one by one. It is a sight to melt even a heart of stone, and it evidently melted the engineer's, for he interposed hastily, thereby winning Bianca Maria's undying gratitude. It was really quite safe; I need have no fear whatever; the little girl should be his special care if she were allowed to go; and when to his assurances were added Bianca Maria's entreaties, her caresses, what could I do but relent?

Instantly Bianca Maria's face cleared as the sky in April; she was the blithest of the blithe: she overwhelmed me with blandishments as I buttoned her waterproof, and declared that the engineer was a man *simpaticissimo*, of a *gentilezza* rarely to be met with. Indeed, she stuck

to his side like a shadow—fearful, I believe, lest, even at the last, I should change my mind.

At length we were embarked, all enfolded like monks in hooded waterproofs, and carrying lanterns in our hands.

As the small iron platform of the lift would hold but four at a time, the engineer, a workman, Bianca Maria, and I made up one party; the machinery was set in motion, and down we sank from the light of day, leaving behind us the splendour, warmth, and colour of the upper world for the silence, chill, and darkness of the mine.

Bianca Maria was undoubtedly scared in the first moments of an experience so tremendous, and clung closely to my hand, but the light of the lamps, the calm steady movement, and the familiar faces reassured her, and she was delighted to trace a parallel between herself and Alice falling down the rabbit-hole; though the shaft, she pointed out, was defective in that there were no marmalade jars ranged against the walls.

For three minutes, which seemed never ending, we descended, the lamps throwing a pale yellow glow upon the wet walls, through which, in places, black and awful-looking tunnels led away to the various galleries of the mine. But we were bound for the lowest level, so paused

for none of these; and the journey seemed very long before we finally stepped out at the bottom, and, while the lift went up to fetch the next detachment of the party, sat down to wait their arrival.

It was a strange sensation. Somewhere far above our heads the sun was shining and the birds singing, but down in the mine there was darkness and silence, profound and absolute, save for the trickle of a little stream of water and the dim yellow light of the lamps.

The place where we sat, too, was a little ghostly, haunted as it was by a tragic memory; for near it, in the recess where the lift came down, a miner, heedless or ignorant of its descent, had once stepped forward to pick up a dropped penknife, and in an instant the whole weight was upon him, crushing him to death.

It was horrible to think of in a place so gloomy; for, unless to stifle in a fog, what could be more terrible than to die in the dark, far from the fresh air, and the sunlight, or the friendly eyes of the stars?

The mercury mines of Monte Amiata are among the largest and most important in the world. The working of them is very ancient, and though it is impossible to assign any exact date for their discovery, it seems likely that

they were not unknown to the Etruscans, and were probably also known to the ancient Pelasgi, who, it is asserted, came into Italy about sixteen centuries before the birth of Christ. The flint arrow-heads, stone picks, and spades which have been found in working some of the galleries prove that the mines were worked even in the Stone Age, and that the excavations date back further than the Age of Iron. It is interesting in such a connection to note what Job says about metals: "Surely there is a vein for the silver and a place for gold where they find it; iron is taken out of the earth, and brass is molten out of the stone;" for if he, in an age so remote, had such knowledge, it is probable that the Pelasgi, coming from those parts, would not be ignorant of such matters, and so would mine in the country of their adoption.

The Etruscans, even if they did not convert the "cinnabar" into mercury, used it in their wonderful paintings, and it is worthy of notice that, while this particular red predominates in the vases and urns found in the tombs in the Monte Amiata district, those found in other regions are painted with other tints.

Another proof of the remote times in which the mines were already known and worked is in a small coin found with some skeletons in

an underground apartment near Castellazzara, which coin bore, in Greek, the name of Philip of Macedon. Only one similar coin is known, and is to be seen in the British Museum, and this little piece of money, which probably passed from the hand of some Greek merchant in payment for metal bought in these parts, affords interesting evidence of the antiquity of the mines.

Upon the Etruscans followed the Romans, and the mines seem to have flourished until the invasion of the Lombards, when, in those times of oppression and slavery and the destruction of ancient cities, all peaceful industries fell into disuse. But as the Lombards became gradually civilised by the teachings of the Christian faith and association with the learning and culture of the older peoples, they fraternised with those whom they had conquered, and were gradually incorporated into the Latin race.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the mines passed into the possession of the Aldobrandeschi, and later, in 1437, on the extinction of the male line, by intermarriage, to the house of Sforza, and have been worked on and off, under various owners, down to the present day.

The procession of waterproofed and cloaked

figures walking in single file along the narrow winding passages must have been a funny one, as we tramped on, swinging our oil-lamps, and with our feet sometimes on dry earth, sometimes in deep mud. At times the passages were so low that we had to stoop, and here and there in a recess or at a sudden turning was heard the tapping of a pick, and there, in the midst of the solitude, was a miner at work, alone in the depths of the earth, his lamp hung above his head.

In places, produced by the damp and dark, grew quantities of pure white mold, long and soft like cotton-wool; while in the rocky walls the cinnabar deposits, which, extracted and smelted, form the mercury, showed in veins and patches of red.

Along the galleries were laid rails on which ran little trucks carrying the ore to the shaft, whence it was raised to the surface; and the process, which we saw later, was no less interesting than the mines themselves.

The ore extracted from the mine is broken into small pieces and spread in the sun to dry. After this it is sent to the roasting furnaces, where the mercury, under pressure of heat, is extracted, and, after various processes beyond the clear comprehension of the unscientific, remains as pure quicksilver or mercury, the

latter name having, according to a Sienese writer of the fifteenth century, been given to it by the alchemists, who named the seven principal metals by the names of the seven planets known to them.

Bianca Maria, on our return to the light of day, was delighted with the great bowls of quicksilver which the engineer showed us, and which, after one of the men had, with a sponge, removed the surface-dirt, shone like magical mirrors; but we were amazed that, though in appearance like silver water, and liquid as water, the resistance was such that we could hardly, with all our force, thrust in our hands.

Workmen were busy pouring the mercury into iron bombs, most of which were destined for London, and which, though small, were of enormous weight.

The majority of the miners were fine, strong-looking men, who did not seem to suffer from their underground life, the mine being well-aired and the work-hours not excessive; but it must be a strange life to spend almost all one's years in darkness—the darkness of the secret places of the earth, or the darkness of sleep until the final darkness of the grave.

Night and day, summer and winter, the work is carried on by fresh relays of workmen;

for in the mines darkness and light, the rise and set of the sun, the waxing or waning of the moon, are all alike.

As I looked out of my window that night, beneath a sky throbbing with stars, at the quiet folds of country, the solemn curves of the hills, where no human being invaded the immense silence and solitude, it was strange to think that beneath those woods, in the heart of those hills, were lonely men working, each in the tiny circle of light cast by his flickering lamp; strange to remember that there, while cities had fallen and races dwindled, and armies passed, leaving no more trace than the snow of some forgotten winter's day, that underground life had continued with little change where, in a dark world which the sun could never penetrate, men sought the riches hidden in the secret places of the earth.

XVII

A DAY AT CORTONA

It was on a still grey day that I went to Cortona from Arezzo; a day unquickened by wind, unbrightened by sun, which seemed to be in accordance with the dull monotonous life of a city, gay enough, doubtless, in olden days, but long since fallen into an uneventful if not ignoble age.

Passing through the Val di Chiana, once, as Dante tells us, a poisonous, fever-stricken swamp, now a well-drained land that, ordered and fertile as it is, has, owing to its unvaried level, no more picturesqueness than a stretch of market-gardens, we ran at the foot of Monte Varchi, rearing its jagged and menacing battlements above the railway, and approached Cortona, a bleak old city which, set upon a hill, cannot be hid.

Seen from a distance it looked sombre and forbidding, rising lonely upon its cone of rock, which it climbs but does not crown.

There are some cities which welcome as you approach them, conquering by their charm; but there is an aloofness about Cortona that

repels rather than invites. It has no smile for the traveller as Florence has; it must always, even in its palmy days, have held aloof from its fellows, like many of the neighbouring mountain towns. Yet its isolation, its dignity, well become it when one remembers that Cortona was one of the most powerful of the twelve inland cities of Etruria and one of the principal towns of the Etruscan Confederation. Indeed, so ancient is it said to be, that tradition makes it the burial-place of Corythus, the father of Dardanus, founder of Troy!

Probably the immense strength of its position—a position well-nigh impregnable in the days of ancient warfare—preserved it to a certain extent from the foreign invasions and internal bickerings of the stormy Middle Ages, which brought confusion and destruction to so many Tuscan towns.

Leaving the train, we zigzagged up the long carriage road which writhes like a great white snake up the hill from the station, our Jehu cracking his whip and urging on his lean horses with a strident "Avanti! via! hep, hep!" at the steep turnings of the way.

Passing on our right the now modernised buildings of the old convent, once a school known as the "Contesse," because only the daughters of noble houses were admitted, we

went on and on, finally rattling into the ancient Piazza, to the immense interest of the inhabitants, for whom the arrival of strangers—and the hope of possible gain therefrom accruing—makes a pleasant interlude in the trifling and monotonous events of their daily lives.

While one is approaching Cortona (and one is certainly long enough about it!) is the time to quote Denis's rhetorical address: "Traveller, thou art approaching Cortona! Dost thou reverence age—that fulness of years which, as Pliny says, 'in man is venerable, in cities sacred'? Here is that which demands thy reverence. Here is a city compared to which Rome is but of yesterday—to which most other cities of ancient renown are fresh and green. Thou mayest have wandered far and wide through Italy—nothing hast thou seen more venerable than Cortona. Ere the days of Hector and Achilles, ere Troy itself arose, Cortona was. Yon solemn city was once the proudest and mightiest in the land, the metropolis of Etruria, and now—but enter its gates and look around!"

Well, so I did; and as for what I saw there, this chapter will speak for itself.

In the Piazza we proposed to descend and, walking round the city, tell all the towers thereof; but our driver was otherwise minded,

being unwilling to resign so soon the goods which the gods had sent him in the shape of *forestieri*, and he insisted on driving us, by the winding road without the city, to the Church of Santa Margherita, which crowns the hill.

True, he admitted, as the Signoria said, it *was* possible to ascend *a piedi* from the Piazza; but it was a way *molto, ma molto, faticoso!* If the Signori did but know! What pity to arrive there already fatigued! Besides, the views on the way up, taken as *he* should take us, would be a thing stupendous, not to be missed! His ingratiating solicitude for our legs, his eagerness that we should lose no sight, were not to be resisted; we re-entered the crazy old carriage, and so on up the hill.

Winding up by the ancient Etruscan walls, we reached the Church of Santa Margherita, in which the hill culminates, and which dominates the city. It is a modern building, attached to the old weather-beaten campanile of Giovanni Pisano; but it was not, however, in its rich and gilded interior that we found the reward of our pilgrimage, but rather in the wonderful view upon which we looked down through the quiet, windless air.

It was a glorious view of immense width, a solemn, spacious, and pallid landscape beneath

a sullen sky. There was little colour; it all looked, from the level lines of plain to the hills behind which was visible a corner of Lake Thrasymene and the distant peaks of Monte Amiata and Monte Cetona, which one could descry far off on the horizon, as if washed in with pale Indian ink. Close at our feet lay the town itself, littered over the hillside, and looking down there was ample opportunity of realising the full charm of Italian roofs and roof-gardens; around us were bleached and bald rocks, whitened, it seemed, with age.

It is interesting in such scenes to remain quiet a little, and try to recreate for oneself something of the past: it is a privilege seldom allowed to the breathless disciples of Cook and Bædeker, who see much but feel little; who "glance and nod and hurry by," and, stuffed with facts like Strasbourg geese by their rote-learned guides, are seldom permitted that in which lies the true blessedness of sight-seeing in such a land—the possession of their own souls.

It is only by profound and patient study, by love and imagination, and in dreamy hours of silence, that we may hope to enter a little into the past of these ancient cities. To see Italy with the eyes, unless there is a soul at the back of them, is of small value. It is in the

still intervals, when we lay aside our guide-books and sit a little, quietly, that her loveliness enters into our hearts and becomes part of us, and we gain something which the world can never take away.

What a past this old city must have known; what solemn Etruscan rites must these gaunt grey rocks have witnessed; what mysterious music, what wild war-cries have they heard! And, long after the old nations had dwindled, their names perished, there followed the vivid, passionate life of the Middle Ages, when the city was dominated by that proud and truculent family of the Casali, who waxed fat for five generations, after which the line perished miserably in the person of one who, having murdered his uncle to seize the inheritance, was himself in turn strangled by Ladislas of Naples and the city sold to Florence. It was easy to picture the gay cavalcades, the many-coloured church pageants, winding up and down the narrow streets, while the people hung the sombre houses with brilliant hangings and crowded into the streets, a vivid, parti-coloured throng; or to call up the figure of the young Angelico, when, sent here for his novitiate, he walked the streets with dreamy eyes; or to imagine the great procession which wound down the hill on its way to Arezzo with the

great Signorelli picture of which Vasari tells the tale.

It all looks staid and dull enough now; yet in spite of its poverty, its narrowness, its squalor, there is an immense dignity about it; and in visiting these old cities with their tremendous and impressive past, one learns to understand something of the reason of that gravity and deep seriousness which, however frivolous the surface may sometimes be, lie at the Tuscan heart.

From Santa Margherita we passed by steep and winding ways, assuredly planned before the days of wheeled traffic, when men went on foot or horseback, down into the town, with its labyrinth of high sombre houses and narrow and precipitous streets. I admit, with a recent writer, that Cortona is squalid; but that troubled me little, being but a wayfarer, and not an abiding citizen, compared with my joy in its blessed innocence of any spirit of modernity such as curses so many an Italian town. Indeed, so far as the twentieth century goes, Cortona is inviolate upon her hilltop. She is the "city become desolate." The sunshine has beaten down upon her, the storms have buffeted her for unnumbered centuries, and still she stands, dominating the plain which sweeps away to the encircling hills. The waves of

modernity which have flowed down through Italy, bringing with them so much ugliness, have left Cortona dry and derelict upon her rocks. She may be bare and unbeautiful, but at least she is not "cheap."

There seemed to be no trade, no activity of any kind; the place was too distant from the railway; a new colony might spring up far down on the plain by the station, but the mother-city was left quiet and empty, with little to disturb the peace of the narrow streets, the great corniced palaces, and the old dim churches which would never again be filled.

What manner of folk, I wondered, as I wandered among them, live now in those great palaces? Do the ancient families still dwell in them, or have they all gone away to the gayer life of Rome and Florence, and left the dark, stately houses to be rented by tenants of the meaner sort? Are the people ever merry in this sad old city? Is any business really carried on at those primitive little booths where the original wide stone bench still stands on either side of the door for the exhibition of goods? Who looks down from those wrought-iron balconies, where surely in past days some Juliet must have stooped towards her lover as the mandoline throbbed in the breathless silence of the summer night? And who makes merry

in the quaint little wine-shops, outside of which hang the green boughs, in spite of the saying that good wine needs no bush? Certainly it seemed very empty of inhabitants, this quiet, grey, half-deserted town; but it was none the less, like most of its sister cities scattered through Italy, rich in traditions and art.

By-and-by our wanderings brought us to the church of San Niccolò, standing in a small green quadrangle, a moss-grown wall shutting it in with its grass and pink roses, its silence and decay. A pillared stone arcade ran along one side of it, and the church itself, which belonged to an old *compagnia*, of which the lordly Luca Signorelli was a member, contains two pictures by him—a "Deposition" with two exquisite angels, and his "Madonna della Seggiola," a painting in tones of green, brown, and red, in which a calm-faced virgin holds her *bambino* on her knee, while on either side stand, grave guardians, St. Peter and St. Paul.

Noble pictures they are, though not among his finest; but there is a peculiar pleasure in studying the work of *il Cortonese* here in his native town.

He must have been a fine fellow, according to the account of his young kinsman Georgio Vasari, who tells us that "Luca Signorelli was a man of most upright life, sincere in

everything, affectionate to his friends, mild and amiable in all his dealings, especially courteous to those who desired his works, and very efficient as well as kind in the instruction of his pupils; he lived splendidly, loved to dress in handsome clothing, and was ever most highly esteemed for his many high qualities, both at home and abroad."

Well, he had cause to be proud, for he was a citizen of no mean city, and a brother of the most noble company of painters—those sons of art who, adding to the beauty of the world, are indeed the sons of God.

Certainly there are a host of things to see in Cortona—the Signorellis, the Fra Angelicos, the Duomo, the Etruscan Lamp, the Greek Muse, and many another; but amongst them all one of the memories I cherish most tenderly is of a bit of unrecorded work which I came upon by chance in a great cold and empty church.

This church, dedicated to San Francesco of Assisi, was decked with all its treasures for the feast of its patron saint, swept and garnished and hung with lovely cinque-cento crimson damask and brocades.

It was amongst the festal frontals which decked the side altars that I saw the piece of work which will always linger in my memory when I think of Cortona. It was of dull pale-

green watered-silk, wrought all over with a continuous pattern in silver, no stitch of any other colour marring the perfect harmony of the whole. Never have I seen a more exquisite frontal; it was suggestive of green waves and silver foam, of the silvery light on leafy glades, and of all kinds of sweet and spring-like things; worked, no doubt, by some religious order or by the ladies of some noble house in the quattro- or cinque-cento; but it was distressing that modern ecclesiastical taste should have chosen to set it up in a border of cheap cotton lace and scarlet calico, a thing so fair in a setting so entirely vile!

Noticeable among the many art treasures in Cortona—and I believe I saw them all—are the Angelicos in the tiny church of the Gesù, and the Signorellis in the Duomo, a building of unimpressive interior distressingly dealt with in the eighteenth century, when the fine old marbles were covered with whitewash, but which stands in a fine position on the hillside, and holds, as well as the three great paintings aforesaid, a lovely aumbry by Mino da Fiesole and the traditional tomb of the Consul Flaminius, who fought in the battle of Lake Thrasymene.

This sarcophagus was found early in the Middle Ages, and, as such fragments often

were, built with care into the inner face of the cathedral wall, and in connection with it Vasari tells a story in his delightful gossiping Lives.

It happened one day, he relates, "in the first fever of the antiquarian fever at Florence, that Donatello told his friend Brunelleschi how, on his way back from Rome, he had seen this monument at Cortona, and what a marvel of beauty it was. The next thing that was seen of Brunelleschi was his producing, in company a few days later, a fine pen-drawing of the monument in question." He had been fired, it appeared, by Donatello's description, and had gone off "as he was, without saying a word, in his town-going cloak and cap and shoes," and had made his way to Cortona on foot—sixty hilly miles—and done his drawing and returned!

Certainly that incident alone was enough to show of what stuff was the ardent soul who was to surmount all difficulties until he had crowned Florence with his great dome, and I like to picture the impetuous little figure panting up the steep hill in his *zoccoli*, and hurrying breathless through the Duomo door.

From the cathedral we passed to the old palace, once town-hall and parliament house, its walls rich with the carved escutcheons of ancient families whose members had acted there as *podestà;* and so on all day, in and out

of ancient churches and galleries, finding, for all the dreariness of the little city, something fair at almost every step.

Ah, what must Italy have been in olden days, when one thinks that now, having furnished every great city in Europe and almost every private gallery with art treasures, she is still so rich herself! For true it is that one can scarcely enter any church, pass along any street, in even the tiniest, most obscure places, without finding some lovely bit of fresco, some tender sculptured image of Madonna, some scrap of embroidery, dreaming away its loveliness. What, then, must her glory have been before they scattered her children's work throughout the world, since even now every smallest place hides a treasure at its heart! I wonder, however, to what extent the inhabitants appreciate these things beyond their value as decoys for the rich *forestieri* who come and spend money in the place? Judging from the amusement our interest in the old streets and shops created, not very much. One man, seeing us gazing up at the façade of a church, paused and gazed too, as if curious what attracted us. I do not know if, having looked for the first time with attention at what he had probably passed unheeding every day of his life, it struck him as beautiful—perhaps

so; for it is very often not until we see the admiration of others that we realise that there is anything in a thing or person to admire.

Certainly the chief event that day in the little town was our presence, and our guide, a boy of about fourteen, felt himself of immense importance in having secured us, and behaved in a very haughty and chilling manner to all who tried to approach to offer information or to beg.

From the latter annoyance we had no small need of protection, as Cortona abounds in beggars—though I hardly know from whom, as a rule, they beg, in a place where all appear to be poor.

What a terrible life a beggar's must be! To what depths, moral if not physical, must a man have fallen before he will adopt it! Yet, when one comes to think of it, it is a rôle which, in a sense, many of us act, begging for sympathy if not for sous. And even for this immaterial aid it is not a very admirable thing to be always a mendicant—personally, I would rather rank myself among the capitalists and bestow.

Well, the longest day wears to a close, and so the hour drew near when we must quit Cortona, since none, I should think, would willingly remain there for a night. But there was one more pleasure in store for us—a blessed surprise had been preparing while

we were in the churches: the menacing sky had cleared, and the west, beyond the solemn ranges of hills, was burning deep red and orange with the glow of the smouldering fires of sunset, and crossed by long bars of flame-flushed cloud. Above was a stretch of primrose melting into purest, tenderest blue, flecked with cirrus clouds of pink and smoke colour; while from west to east, a message from the departing sun to the place of dawn, stretched, like a rainbow or bridge spanning the heavens, a cloud-track of rose and grey, faint and ethereal as a dream.

As we drove down the long hill up which the ox-wains were creaking in the twilight and the peasants trudging homewards from the fields, the shadows crept up from the plain towards the city, stealing forward like a besieging army; but they had not yet reached and overpowered the ancient Etruscan walls of the old Capitol, which was crowned with golden light.

So it was that, in the stillness of the evening, we left the little city alone with the stars in the silence—alone, as befitted its perished greatness, with the austere light of the waning moon!

XVIII

IN THE AUTUMN WOODS

THE FEAST OF ST. MARTIN

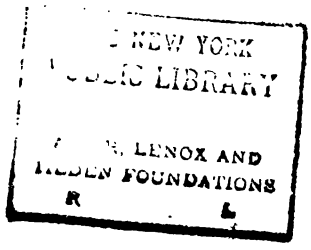
It was through a world of gold and blue—the gold of dying leaves, the blue of a soft autumnal sky and of frail wreaths of mist lingering among the tree-trunks—that I made my way up the chestnut woods on the Feast of St. Martin, while from the belfries of the little churches scattered over the hillsides the bells rang out in honour of the soldier-saint.

It was a serene November day—the last of the *villeggiatura*. The vintage was over, but the summer seemed dying so lingeringly that it was hard to believe winter was close at hand. The garden was yet gay with pink roses, the air was warm, and only the yellowing foliage, the tracery of bare branches from which the leaves had already fallen, served to remind one that the year was on the wane.

Although it was yet early in the afternoon the sun was already stooping low towards the western wall of the valley, while up the eastern hills the shadow crept steadily as the shadow of approaching death may creep up the hills of

Photo. G. R. Ballance.

IN THE AUTUMN WOODS.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life. But on the high lands to which I had climbed there yet lay the level golden light, rendered a warmer yellow by the autumnal haze. Even the olives on the opposite hills, most pensive of trees though they be, had taken richer tints in the concentrated sunshine, and the commonest stones and humblest plants seemed to have been transmuted to gold by the mysterious alchemy of that serene light. The tranquil sky was turquoise at the horizon, pale sapphire towards the zenith, the two tints separated by a band of pearly grey. Was it, I wondered as I looked, from such a sky that Filippino Lippi learned that beautiful and daring scheme of blues which delights us to-day in his Uffizi Madonna, with her slender, blue-cloaked figure silhouetted against the lucid space of evening sky? The fair upland plain of Arezzo stretched away to the mountains of Casentino, a dim silvery green through the faint mist, which lent a peculiar softness and mystery to the air. In the foreground the succession of low rounded hills were such as old Piero della Francesca, and many of the Umbrian masters, loved to paint.

It was very still there in the autumn woods as I sat motionless and looked out on the wide horizon spread before my eyes. It was such a view as I never weary of; for if in one sense

ever the same, it is in another always different, according to the varying time and weather—just as, according to the varying mental atmosphere through which we view it, our past, our whole life, may seem on some days quite happy, on others very sad. For me there is some especial quality or characteristic about these Tuscan hills which always, in however turbid a mood I may be, calms my restlessness with some spell as strong as that of running water; so that I may say, in a very real sense, that I look up to the hills from whence cometh my help.

All around was the saffron, honey, bronze, and dead gold of the fading oaks and chestnuts; over the grass and bushes the spiders had woven a web of silvery gossamer which sparkled in the sun; far down on the plain a tiny train—it seemed a mere toy, so far off was it—puffed its way towards Rome. So quiet was the air that no leaf quivered: only from time to time one fluttered with a little rustle to its rest on mother-earth. The bees in the great chestnut-tree above my head were humming continuously—a dull booming, as if they believed it were summer. I suppose their hive and store of winter honey were within the gnarled and moss-grown trunk. Now and then a cock crowed from a farm across the valley; the bells of Arezzo, that ancient and

turbulent little city which, under its cheerful modern prosperity hides a past so stormy, floated up from the plain below, ringing in honour of Martin who, "yet but a catechumen," bestowed his cloak upon the beggar who was none other than the Lord Himself.

Surely, when one comes to think of it, there is a certain fitness in naming for that courteous saint the season when nature, if but for a moment, flings as a cloak her gold and crimson upon a world which, stripped of her fruits, will soon be lying desolate and bare. True, it is a cloak soon rent, and a gold which passes before the wintry wind all too fast as measured by our time; but the garment does not really wear out sooner nor the gold perish more quickly than do our treasures of gold and gear when judged in the light of eternity; and they have at least this merit, that they are generously offered to all; for it is only men who hoard and give grudgingly—the best things, the elemental things, are free.

For how many centuries has gold been the dream of men! Midas prayed that all he touched might turn to gold; Eldorado was the vision of the old explorers; the discovery of some subtle alchemy which should transmute base metal was the dream of the Middle Ages; and even to-day the old madness works in the

hearts of men, and many a life is ruined through its greed of gold.

Yet there are some who know better! In the old fairy-tale, when three brothers went forth to seek their fortune, the first fancied he had found the best life had to offer when he came to a forest of silver, and, having filled his pockets, turned back; the second came to a golden forest, and, loading himself with gold, found what seemed to him the best of all things and went his way; but the third, believing that there was better in store than gold or silver, went ever forward, and, journeying, found love and the imperishable joys of life. Certainly the story, like so many an old legend, is but the embroidery upon a web of truth, the wisdom of the ages; and some of us are still wise enough to do as the youngest brother and to set the essential above the non-essential, the eternal above the transient, valuing at no more than their rightful value the flesh-pots of Egypt and the Amalekites' gold. Not that I have any patience with those who go to the other extreme and say that money is unimportant: their very platitudes prove that they have never known its lack; but only that, beautiful as are the things it may bring us, it is never of itself a sufficient end.

It was some such thoughts as these that

came to me as I looked down over that golden world of gorges clothed with oak and chestnut and up to the soft blue sky; indeed, so absorbed was I in them that I did not hear any approaching footsteps, and was taken by surprise when, up the stony mule track near me, came a staid donkey of mature age in a brave scarlet cloth, almost hidden by the immense load of faggots on her back. She advanced with much circumspection, planting her little hoofs delicately, while a handsome peasant boy of fifteen or sixteen walked by her side. They made a picturesque little group, and the boy seemed inspired by a perfect passion of affection for his donkey, for, as he went along, he continually flung his arms around her shaggy neck, exclaiming in ecstasy, "Oh gioia mia! oh bella mia!" as if his whole heart centred in that elderly ass. Together they passed on up the path towards one of the higher farms, leaving behind them a consoling reminder of the friendship which, for all the talk of the cruelty of Italians to their animals, exists oftener than we imagine; and silence fell again upon the wood.

The next intruder upon my solitude was a little goat-herd, a timid, shy-eyed creature, hardly less wild than the beasts she tended; her frock torn, her bare legs scratched by the

brambles, and a mass of shaggy red hair falling around a quaint little white face. She paused at a distance, eyeing me like a frightened fawn; but by degrees, as I held out a large rosy apple to tempt her, she edged nearer and a little nearer, the dry chestnut leaves rustling beneath her naked feet, until she stood at my side, clutching the apple in her small brown hand.

I asked her if she loved her goat, a patriarchal animal with a long beard and wise yellow eyes, and she nodded assent; but at the moment when I hoped to draw her into conversation, the goat, attracted, I suppose, by the distant vision of some particularly succulent tuft of herbage, suddenly dashed off and raced recklessly down the hill, dragging his little keeper with him by the rope with which convention required that she should control him; and I pitied the poor bare legs and feet as I saw the small figure in its faded crimson frock plunging headlong through briars and over stones until it was out of sight.

Rising at last, I made my way upwards, following the sun, which was fast retreating from the lower lands. In places a pungent whiff of wood smoke was blown across the pathway from the smouldering fire of some

charcoal-burner, a familiar sight in Italian woods, since in Italy, where all coal must be imported, the charcoal brazier is a common means of warmth. Only oak-wood is used, and, having been chopped into pieces, is piled closely in heaps of a regular size and covered with brushwood, earth, and turf. A well is left in the middle, in which small firewood is placed, and, after it is all covered from the air, a lighted stick is dropped down and the hole turfed over, and it is then left to smoulder slowly for several days until ready for use. If the pile breaks into flame, the charcoal is spoiled and all the labour lost.

The charcoal-burners hovering over their fires were not the only people upon whom I came in the woods that afternoon. Many of the peasants were out gathering their chestnut harvest, and more than one suspicious-looking character I saw with a basket, ostensibly full of arbutus berries, but which, from the rather furtive manner of its owner, and the effusive wishes of *Buona sera* and *Buona passeggiata* with which I was greeted, held, I imagine, stolen nuts, which these poachers from the neighbouring villages were carrying away by stealth.

From time to time a donkey passed carrying down a load of chestnuts to be stored in the *seccatoia* or drying-hut, where, after the

marroni, as the big round nuts are called, have been sorted out for the confectioners' shops and the market, the small ones are dried above very slow fires for two months, when they are ready to be ground into flour for the *polenda* and *miliaccio*, which form the peasants' staple winter food.

At last my long climb brought me to the hilltop; and sitting on a mossy stone, a little breathless with the steepness of the way, I looked out upon the wide and wonderful country which extended on every side.

There lay Cortona white upon its hillside, and, a little less far, Castiglione Florentino, still enclosed within its stout mediæval walls. There lay Thrasymene—a lake that for me has ever a mysterious and haunting charm; and on the other side Arezzo, which, standing in the midst of the plain from which the girdling mountains receded, was strangely suggestive of what Florence must have been in the ancient days before her great cupola rose or she spread beyond the narrow circuit of her embattled walls. Far away, the sky paled a little above the faint outlines of Monte Amiata, Monte Cetona, and Montepulciano. At the foot of the hill the Val di Chiana extended, level as a lake.

It was across that stretch of historic country

at my feet that, on the 21st of October 1327, the great funeral of the truculent prince-bishop, Guido Tarlati of Pietramarla, passed with stately pageant from Monte Amiata, where his stormy life had ended, to the tomb in the cathedral of Arezzo, where Agostino and Agnolo da Siena have sculptured with such bitter irony his splendour and his shame.

A turbulent soul he had been, like many another mediæval bishop; his helmet oftener upon his head than his mitre, his sword more frequently in his hand than his pastoral staff. Many a castle had he subdued; many an old fortress had flared up, blazing as a beacon on its hilltop, a warning to all neighbouring fastnesses that the stormy prelate of Arezzo was on the warpath, leaving behind him, to witness to his passing, blackened walls and stains of blood. They say of him that he ever celebrated Mass with his helmet ready beside him upon the altar; and certain it is that he ruled Arezzo with a stern hand, and fought fiercely against her enemies, adding, by fraud or violence, many a broad acre to her possessions, until finally, in the year 1327, he went the way of all flesh, in fear and much trembling by reason of his many sins.

It is ever interesting to try and recreate old scenes in the very surroundings in which

they were acted; and, gazing out across that memory-haunted country, it was easy to conjure up some picture of the scene of that long-past day.

The sun, dipping behind the mountains, must have been sending across the land such tints of gold and purple as glow in old mosaics and missals, and gilding the summits of the hills and the vast waiting multitude gathered to see their bishop carried to his rest. Then slowly from the distant castle of Monte Amiata must have been seen approaching an immense cortège, ever growing, as at every *paese* and *castello* fresh relays of mourners, with grave, sad faces, were waiting to join it and bring it on its way. Everywhere the work of the vintage would be suspended, its gay songs silenced, and a melancholy have fallen on the land in the midst of its harvest rejoicings, while, from the ancient mediæval castles which crowned the hills along the way, the black pennons, floating in the golden air, proclaimed a people's sorrow for one who had been, for all his sins, a heroic citizen, a staunch defender of the Republic's weal.

What a procession that must have been![1]

[1] I would here acknowledge my debt to an interesting and picturesque account of the funeral of Guido Tarlati in Professor Vecoli's pamphlet, the "Caduta della Repubblica di Arezzo."

First, leading the way, the golden cross upon its staff of silver; then, two and two, the multitude of the religious orders; and after them the clergy of all the country round, the evening light lending additional splendour to their vestments, but a little paling the flames of the long candles which each one carried in his hand. How the long, sad chant must have wailed along the valley; how drearily the bells of Arezzo, ringing now so jubilantly in honour of another soldier, must have responded to that melancholy dirge! Behind would be borne the bier, with its ample draperies of black velvet heavily fringed with gold, upon which rested, at the head a jewelled mitre, at the feet a helmet, and, crossed between the two, a sword and pastoral staff. After this must have followed the great nobles, Guelf and Ghibelline laying aside for once their political differences and uniting a common sorrow in a common cause; behind them the trade guilds, so important a factor in the life of the Middle Ages; and, bringing up the rear, an immense concourse of the people, profoundly silent, with that silence of a multitude hushed under a single emotion, which is so much deeper, more impressive, than any silence of the hills or lonely woods.

How striking must have been the sight when

the great cortège entered at last the gates of the city through which that figure, now composed in the austere peace of death, had often ridden forth to fight and home to triumph; when it passed up the narrow streets between the grim old houses hung with sable, between the close ranks of the weeping people, up the steep hill which leads to the higher part of the city where, close together, rise the Palace of the Commune, the People's Palace, the great Fortezza, and the Duomo; until at last it passed within the doors of the cathedral, and up the dim aisle beneath the lofty Gothic arches, bringing Guido Tarlati, his long warfare —for good or ill—accomplished, to his rest.

Certainly it is for none of us faulty human beings to judge each other; still less is it possible to form any just estimate of the character and conduct of a man so far remote from us in time and thought; but we know that Guido, for all his gain and glory, died miserably, tormented by the memory of his many crimes; haunted perhaps — who knows? — by the memory of the fire and blood which had so often been the proofs of his passing. And somehow, as I sat there in those autumn woods, among all that perishing gold, while the mists upon the plain seemed fit emblems of that great procession, hardly less transient

or immaterial, which had once passed in his honour, earthly success assumed, for the moment at least, its just proportions, and the figure of Martin rose up as a nobler ideal, since it is ever better to give than to get, to be poor and make rich, to share with others than to save for self.

Yes, there in the midst of that peaceful landscape the strenuous life of cities, the eager competition, the fierce striving for precedence, seemed very remote, even very foolish; the calm of the land was itself a rebuke as, shorn of its wealth of corn and fruit, it lay, not rebellious nor discouraged for the loss of its treasure, but still and peaceful upon that autumn day. Nature is so wisely acquiescent of the rain and storm that, once they are passed, she takes up her accustomed way, or, if that be impossible, the way which best she can, without any bitterness or resentment for the suffering undergone. Why, I wondered, as I watched it, do we not take the loss of *our* treasure more calmly? Why are our recurring winters of bereavements so stormy? We might well take for our comfort a lesson from the land, learning there that God never gives two harvests at once, that always He strips the earth of one before He gives another; while we, by far less patient, are up in arms

if anything be taken from the fields of *our* life, and cannot bear the season when, in trust, we must wait, apparently bare and impoverished, for the future spring. Perhaps it is because in one sense we do not live enough in the present, in another, too little in the future; for to live in the present may be well, since each moment of life is of itself bearable if we do not weight it with the regrets of the past nor the apprehensions of what is coming; and on the other hand, the sure promise of a coming spring, for us as well as for nature, might often lend us comfort in the long winter of our discontent.

Ah well, I fear that I, like many others, resemble Alice in Wonderland, in that I am fond of giving myself good advice upon which I too seldom act; yet it is well, even for a little while, to think such thoughts; their very passing leaves a perfume, if but a transient one, in our hearts.

The sudden dipping of the sun behind the mountains roused me with a start from my meditations; the shadows, which had been stealing up from the valley, were upon me all at once, and the perceptible chilling of the air, the gathering twilight, warned me that I must leave my solitude and return, driven in by night, to the haunts of men.

IN THE AUTUMN WOODS

The woods were quiet and melancholy as I made my way swiftly through them with no desire to linger; for what is there sadder than an autumn evening, when light and colour and summer die together, and the sunset and the tree tints are as the flames of a funeral pyre?

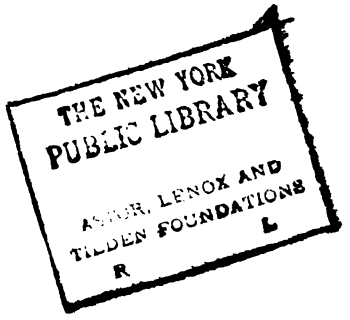
It was very still and a little eerie among the chestnuts, some of which must have been young in the days of Bishop Guido; the little goat-herd had doubtless already stabled her headstrong charge for the night, and the peasants, of whose lives the sun is arbiter, had turned their footsteps home. Only once as I came through the wood did I meet with any human beings; fit figures they were in such a scene. The old woman, her bundle of faggots on her back, walked in front; the old man, bowed with many years, limped behind, and between them they kept up a fragmentary conversation as they toiled up the stony way. They seemed in keeping with the infinite sadness and regret of the hour; for was it not with them all evening—the evening of the day, of the year, and of their lives? Autumn almost inevitably awakens in us a strange nostalgia, a home-sickness for the *al di là*, a heart-hunger such as is born of the gloaming of the year and of the day alike; and I won-

dered as they passed me, trudging wearily, whether they, for whom the other land must be very near, felt this more strongly than I, for whom it may well be very far.

As I hastened along the darkening road which, perfectly level, runs from Arezzo up the Happy Valley, between two strips of fertile land shut in on either side by walls of hill, the exquisite outline of the mountains on the right cut sharp and black against the rose and gold and liquid green of the lingering sunset; a few bright stars began to spangle the sky; on the left the moon rolled slowly up above the hills; here and there from the open door of a cottage shone out a dim oil-lamp or the friendly light of a fire; groups of peasants, with their courteous *Buona sera*, passed, carrying tools or loads of brushwood or fodder, on their way home from the fields. The dew fell like a benediction; a touch of frost sharpened the air; silence, mystery, and peace rested upon the face of the earth; the breeze which arose and stirred the tree-tops was as a sigh of weariness with which Nature settled herself for slumber, and the dark came down as softly as it comes beneath the pressure of the breast-feathers when the mother-bird alights and spreads her wings above the young ones in the nest. It was a fit close to an enchanted

Photo. G. R. Ballance.

GROUP OF PEASANTS ON THEIR WAY HOME FROM THE FIELDS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hour; a fit ending to another *villeggiatura*. It is such experiences that I would enshrine through all the years, so that, no matter what the future may give or take, I may keep for ever in my heart a little space filled with peace and fragrance—such fragrance as lingers in quiet rooms scented with pot-pourri, the roses of a dead summer, the tranquil memories of a lovely past.

THE END

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
Edinburgh & London